Charles Lamb's Treatment of the Past

by

Lois Emery Nielson

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CHARLES LAMB'S TREATMENT OF THE PAST

by

Lois Emery Nielson

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Approved
by

First Reader . . . Winslow H. Loveland . . . .
Professor of English

Second Reader . . . George M. Sneath . . . .
Professor of English

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem. The Lamb literature, with its many biographies, criticisms, and collections of works, includes hundreds of books. Every phase of his personality, his writing, his life has been touched on by many admirers and critics. And each of these has found some new detail to add to our knowledge of this beloved author, or has discussed him from a different angle. In reading Lamb himself I became interested in that turn of his personality which expresses itself so passionately in one of his essays, "Antiquity! thou wondrous charm!" Many critics have mentioned Lamb's interest in things old and past, but I have found no extended treatment of this interest as a strong influence on Lamb's life and writing.

Importance of the study. In making this study I realize that Charles Lamb's love of the past is not the most important phase of his work. Discussions of his humor, his style, his relations with friends, his place as a familiar essayist, perhaps, would be considered more essential topics. But his love of the past has a distinct influence on each of these as well as on the whole of Lamb's life and work. Any extended critique of Lamb from another angle, must, of necessity, include some mention of his interest in bygone things.

Therefore, I believe that since Lamb's love of the past pervades his work so thoroughly, it is a subject worthy of study by itself.

Definition of terms used. The word "past," as I am using it in this study, does not primarily refer to an ancient period of history, to medievalism or to orientalism. Lamb is not an historian in the sense that he treats of the history of races or countries. His is rather a personal history, a reverie, a recollection of incidents, places, and people whom he knew. He invests these memories with the flavor of the past, so that they appear to be an incarnation of the past. He lived in the world of memories, memories of a happy childhood that were a soothing escape from the grief of later years. His remembrance of actual historical facts was very hazy, but his ability to recall ideas, images, and impressions of his youth was remarkable. He talked of them with his friends, he wrote of them for the London Magazine, he dreamed of them while bending over the cold figures in a ledger at the East India House. They brought warmth and sunshine into his life, and as we read them more than a century later, we, too, are cheered by these happy memories.

But another part of Lamb's love of the past contains more real history than do his reveries. His respect for the old writers and his love of old books led him particularly into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He detached

himself from the literature of his own day and rediscovered for us many of the old dramatists and prose writers and poets who had been nearly forgotten. Thus, the "past" with which Lamb deals is mainly literary history and criticism and his own personal reminiscences.

A study of Lamb's works will reveal that he avoids all doctrines and theories about the past. He gives us an aroma of the past, a reverie of things in former years, but he doesn't theorize, as Hazlitt tells us. "He has no grand swelling theories to attract the visionary and the enthusiast."[1] Both Lamb and Hazlitt view their personal past with an impassioned recollection, an emotional memory. To Hazlitt this recollection becomes an essential part of his critical theory. Lamb's memories are of personal things, but he doesn't stop to tell us why. He enjoys memories of his relatives, of Mackery End, of the Temple, but he doesn't theorize about the past as a period that he loves. Hazlitt often defends the value of the past. He says, for instance, "We are, indeed, indebted to the ages that have gone before us, and could not well do without them."[2] Again he declares in Table Talk:

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[1] Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age, edited by Ernest Rhys. Everyman Edition (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1928), p.346.

[2] William Hazlitt, Selections from William Hazlitt, edited by Will David Howe (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1913), p. 249.

> To say that the past is of no importance, unworthy of a moment's regard, because it has gone by, and is no longer anything, is an argument that cannot be held to any purpose; for if the past has ceased to be, and is therefore to be accounted nothing in the scale of good or evil, the future is yet to come, and has never been anything.[3]

Thus Hazlitt emphasizes the value and importance of the past, while his friend, Charles Lamb, writes of antiquity and praises objects and memories from the past, but has no doctrine to defend. As we read Lamb we enjoy his reveries of the past without the theories he might have added.

Review of the literature. Any study of Charles Lamb would not be complete without some mention of those critics who have distinguished themselves as Lamb authorities. Some of these men knew Lamb as a contemporary and a friend as well as a writer. Alfred Ainger was well fitted for the task of writing the sympathetic life of Lamb that we read in the last volume of his edition of Lamb's Works, and again in the English Men of Letters Series. He writes as a friend of Lamb rather than as a scholar. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, in his Memoirs of Charles Lamb, gives an intimate sketch of the life of Lamb in such an allusive style that shows he knew the contemporary life and literature of Lamb's day. Henry Crabb Robinson, Byran Waller Proctor (alias Barry Cornwall), and William Haz-

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[3] William Hazlitt, Table Talk: Essays on Men and Manners, edited by William Carew Hazlitt (London: Bell & Daldy, 1870) pp. 25-26.

litt were members of Lamb's circle who give us interesting sidelights on their friend. More recently, Edmund Blunden and notably, Mr. E. V. Lucas have added new details to our knowledge of Elia. Lucas's monumental biography is comprehensive in its details of Lamb as a man, as a writer and as the center of a wide circle of friends. Very recently facts have come to light in Lucas's volume, _At the Shrine of St. Charles_.

These and other commentators on Charles Lamb have added much to our store of Lamb-literature, but in the last analysis our best and most delightful source of information about his personality and associations is from his own pen. It is mainly to his diary of letters and his autobiographical essays that we turn to analyze Lamb's love of the past.

I am using the complete edition of Lamb's _Works_ edited by Alfred Ainger. This edition contains eight volumes, but they are not given volume numbers. Therefore I will refer to them according to the volume numbers assigned to them in the College of Liberal Arts Library of Boston University. According to these numbers, the volumes contain Lamb's works as follows: Volumes I and II, _The Letters of Charles Lamb_; Volume III, _Essays of Elia_; Volume IV, _Last Essays of Elia_ and _Mrs. Leicester's School_; Volume V, _Tales from Shakespeare by Charles and Mary Lamb_; Volumes VI and VII, _Poems, Plays, and_

Miscellaneous Essays; Volume VIII, Charles Lamb, by Alfred Ainger, "The Adventures of Ulysses," "Guy Faux," and a few essays. Throughout the thesis I have tried to make definite references to essays and letters to avoid as much confusion as possible.

Organization of the remainder of the thesis. Chapter Two of my thesis will discuss the reasons why Lamb turned away from the present to the past and will show how strongly his childhood and early life influenced this phase of his personality. Chapter Three will deal with his pseudonym and the charming Elia personality as they bear on his interest in the past. In Chapter Four will be found an extended analysis of the several ways in which Lamb reveals his love of the past. This study has been based on a thorough reading of his works, and quotations from the author himself are used freely. Chapter Five contains a more objective view of Lamb's treatment of the past as it affects his style. This includes some mention of his use of imagination and his creation of an atmosphere of the past. It is this flavor of antiquity that Lamb, as a genuine lover of the past, imparts to those who read him.

CHAPTER II

THE PERSONALITY OF A LOVER OF THE PAST

Effects of His Early Environment

> . . . The character in a capital degree moulds oftentimes the life, but the life always in a subordinate degree moulds the character. And, the character being in this case of Lamb so much of a key to the writings, it becomes important that the life should be traced, however briefly, as a key to the character.[1]

These words from De Quincey very aptly state the purpose of the present chapter. The circumstances of Lamb's life were of major importance in shaping his inner self and causing him to look backward, to withdraw from the present, and to mock the future.

In his boyhood he was constantly surrounded by relics of the past. His first visions were of the old buildings of the Inner Temple and of the antiquated clerks who moved about them so solemnly. He writes of his early home:

> I was born, and passed the first seven years of my life, in the Temple. Its church, its halls, its gardens, its fountains, its river, I had almost said--for in those young years, what was this king of rivers to me but a stream that watered our pleasant places?--these are of my oldest recollections.[2]

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[1] Thomas De Quincey, "Charles Lamb," The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, edited by David Masson (London: A. & C. Black, 1897), V, 219.

[2] Charles Lamb, "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," The Life and Works of Charles Lamb, edited by Alfred Ainger. Edition de Luxe (Boston: The C. T. Brainard Publishing Co., n. d.), III, 169.

The secluded gardens and the buildings were steeped in the rich history of the Knights Templar and of old legal London. The Temple Church, with its burden of the remains of Crusaders and Knights, old medieval records, curious images and statues, fascinated both Charles and his sister. Scholars and lawyers haunted the Temple and its libraries of old classics, its rooms stocked with old furnishings. The Lamb children gazed with "superstitious veneration" on the "Old Worthies" promenading in the gardens, or played quietly about the fountains and sundials. It was indeed a picturesque environment for the young Lamb, and his own description of it suggests how fitting it was that he should have been planted there, "a rare growth, nourished by the rich soil of the past; in the one place in London where everyday life keeps yet something like a saving grace of antiquity."[3] It was here, too, that Charles and Mary first began to read the old English authors and books. Lamb tells of Mary's (and his) early reading, and we are led to believe that the library must have been that of Samuel Salt, the clerk of the Temple and friend of the Lambs.

> . . . She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage.[4]

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[3] Ernest Rhys, Introduction to the Essays of Elia (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., Ltd., n. d.), p. ix.

[4] Lamb, *op. cit.*, "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," III, 149.

Of course, life in the Temple Court could have been prosaic and boresome to the young Charles had it not been for his imagination and fancy that threw the glamour of antiquity over these early years and caused him to exclaim later over its "wondrous charm."

In turning to the next phase of Lamb's early life, we see again how fortunate was the environment for one of Lamb's temperament. He entered Christ's Hospital at the age of seven, a gentle, kindly, shy lad. The "Blue-coat" school was an old and respected charity institution, and Charles was favored in getting a presentation to it through Samuel Salt. His life there was a happy one, for his schoolfellows indulged him and he had some "peculiar advantages" unknown to his classmates.

> . . . His friends lived in town, and were near at hand; and he had the privilege of going to see them, almost as often as he wished, through some invidious distinction, which was denied to us.[5]

He had hot rolls and tea, hot roast veal, and other good things brought by his Aunt Hetty. How treasured must have been memories of these carefree, privileged days to the saddened Lamb of later years!

His school life furnished a medieval atmosphere for Lamb's youthful days as the Temple Court had for his infancy.

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[5] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 24.

He honors it in his "Recollections of Christ's Hospital:"

> For the Christ's Hospital boy feels that he is no charity-boy; he feels it in the antiquity and regality of the foundation to which he belongs; in the usage which he meets with at school, and the treatment he is accustomed to out of its bounds; . . . he feels it in his education, in that measure of classical attainments, which every individual at that school, though not destined to a learned profession, has it in his power to procure, attainments which it would be worse than folly to put it in the reach of labouring classes to acquire; he feels it in the numberless comforts, and even magnificences, which surround him; in his old and awful cloisters, with their traditions . . .[6]

In this charity school Lamb studied the musty classical course offered. He learned Latin and Greek and must have been a good student, for he later used both languages in many allusions, and even wrote full-length letters in Latin to Coleridge. The mention of Coleridge's name reminds us of the strong influence the "inspired charity-boy" had on young Charles. Lamb remembers him telling in "deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of Jamblichus, or Plotinus . . ., or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar. . ."[7] It was undoubtedly he who nourished Lamb's interest in old books and devotion to old writers.

This love of old books was further fostered during Lamb's vacations with his Grandmother Field in the fine old Plumer house in Hertfordshire. He read Cowley and other

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[6] Ibid., "Recollections of Christ's Hospital," VI,280-81.

[7] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 42.

writers in the library at Blakesware, and let his imagination play over their ancient works as it did over the gallery of old family portraits, the carved chimneys, and the stately marble busts. The child Lamb would fancy that he owned these rare antiques as he tasted the exaltation of life in a great house. The mansion and its grounds were sombre indeed and did much to make Lamb an old-fashioned child. His description of it helps us to understand how this could be:

> Why, every plank and panel of that house for me had magic in it. The tapestried bedrooms--tapestry so much better than painting--not adorning merely, but peopling the wainscots--at which childhood ever and anon would steal a look, shifting its coverlid (replaced as quickly) to exercise its tender courage in a momentary eye-encounter with those stern bright visages, staring reciprocally--all Ovid on the walls, in colours vivider than his descriptions. . .
>
> Then, that haunted room--in which old Mrs. Battle died --whereinto I have crept, but always in the daytime, with a passion of fear; and a sneaking curiosity, terror-tainted, to hold communication with the past.[8]

He confesses in the same essay that he was a lonely child, and his solitude fed his wonder and imagination and admiration both for the house and for the dark romantic lake he fancied near it. With Ainger we say:

> . . . The genius of Lamb was surely guided into its special channel by the chance that the first fourteen years of his life were passed, as has been said, "between cloister and cloister," between the mediaeval atmosphere of the quiet Temple and that of the busy school of Edward VI.[9]

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[8] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 3.

[9] Ibid., "Charles Lamb," VIII, 3.

Wordsworth might well have been writing of his friend, Charles Lamb, when he said, "The Child is father of the Man."

Escape from His Work

Two years after leaving Christ's Hospital, Lamb got a post in the South-Sea House, and probably worked as a young clerk under the eye of his brother John. That he hated to leave school and start work is revealed in "The Superannuated Man:"

> . . . Melancholy was the transition at fourteen from the abundant playtime, and the frequently-intervening vacations of school days, to the eight, nine, and sometimes ten hours' a-day attendance at the counting-house. But time partially reconciles us to anything. I gradually became content--doggedly contented, as wild animals in cages.[10]

The importance to the present study of the five-months' sojourn in this office lies mainly in the fact that it provided him with a pseudonym and brought him again into the presence of his beloved antiquity. The office itself and the old clerks that inhabited it reminded him of former things and strengthened his fancy for the old.

> Amid the dull routine of compound additions and subtractions, of red ink and black ink entries, Charles Lamb managed to store his mind with favorite scraps of knowledge, which raised longings and visions, such as ripen at last to works of passion, and reflection, and invention.[11]

In 1792, Lamb entered the East India House as a copying clerk. The building was a sculptured stone structure with

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[10] Ibid., "The Superannuated Man," IV, 78.

[11] Thomas Craddock, Charles Lamb, (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1867), p. 12.

vaults full of wealth from the East. All about the building was an atmosphere of seclusion and antiquity, the kind of environment in which Lamb was most content.

But we also have reason to believe that the young scholarly clerk was often lonely in London at this period of his life. His fellow-clerks at work probably were little interested in old books and authors or in the creative literary turn that Lamb now took. Mary was often taken with fits of insanity and Coleridge was away from London. To whom could Lamb turn? He writes to Coleridge in June of 1796:

> . . . Thank you for your frequent letters: you are the only correspondent, and I might add, the only friend I have in the world. I go nowhere, and have no acquaintance. Slow of speech, and reserved of manners, no one seeks or cares for my society; and I am left alone.[12]

We can see in Lamb's loneliness added reason for turning his gaze backward into memories of his happy childhood and into the literature of yesterday.

But what about his actual work in the India House? Was there nothing there to interest him and occupy his mind? We have Lamb's own answer, written after he was pensioned:

> If peradventure, Reader, it has been thy lot to waste the golden years of thy life--thy shining youth--in the irksome confinement of an office; to have thy prison days prolonged through middle age down to decrepitude and silver hairs, without hope of release or respite; to have lived to forget that there are such things as holidays, or to remember them but as the prerogatives of childhood;

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[12] Lamb, *op. cit.*, Letter, June 10, 1796, I, Chap. I, 19.

> then, and then only, will you be able to appreciate my deliverance.[13]

Lamb kept accounts in big ledgers during thirty-three years of unfailing devotion to his duties at the office. He hated the hours and days of drudgery; he wanted to escape, to forget it; but it was his duty, and he only mocked the boredom and went right on clerking. His submission to this mechanical work shows the deep moral and mental strength of this little black-clad man, and we honor him for his consistency. Often Lamb felt that he was accomplishing nothing and had little to show for all the weary hours spent behind his desk.

> . . . Nobody, he must have felt, was ever likely to study this great work of his [the ledgers], not even Dr. Dryasdust. He had written in vain, which is not pleasant to know. . . . And consequently the _opera omnia_ of Lamb, drawn up in a hideous battalion, at the cost of labour so enormous, would be known only to certain families of spiders in one generation, and of rats in the next.[14]

De Quincey has thus sympathetically expressed what must have been the feeling of Lamb toward his work. Surely his ledgers offered him no relief from the loneliness of his life. They rather encouraged an escape into memories of vacations spent in "hearty, homely, loving Hertfordshire," of the privileged years in Christ's Hospital, and of all the fond dreams of his youth.

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[13] _Ibid._, "The Superannuated Man," IV, 78.

[14] De Quincey, _op. cit._, V, 227.

We must add, however, that the routine of keeping accounts had its value for the young clerk. It furnished him with steady employment and money without overtaxing his mind. I can imagine him sitting at his desk and copying figure after figure while his Ariel-like fancy flew where it pleased--back into childhood or into the seventeenth century literature. He dreamed of things behind his desk during the day and went home to put them into the immortal essays and letters by candlelight in the evening. After his pension from the East India Company, Lamb tells us that he hardly knew what to do with himself when he became "Retired Leisure":

> . . . I was in the condition of a prisoner in the old Bastile, suddenly let loose after a forty years' confinement. I could scarce trust myself with myself. It was like passing out of Time into Eternity--for it is a sort of Eternity for a man to have all his Time to himself.[15]

Lucas, the eminent biographer of Lamb, emphasizes how detrimental this unemployment was to Lamb: "No one was less fitted than he to be solitary and unemployed."[16] It was essential that Lamb have the routine of work and the companionship of many friends. Instead, he spent his time with his own thoughts in Islington or Enfield.

But if, in these later years, Lamb wanted the routine

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[15] Lamb, *op. cit.*, "The Superannuated Man," IV, 82.

[16] E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1921), II, 674.

of office work as an impetus to his literary efforts and as a mental stabilizer, at least his leisure gave him more time for reminiscence, in which he indulged freely. He had begun his habit of looking backward as a child in the Temple, and it never left him.

Escape from His Grief

In addition to the influences of Lamb's home and school and work on his interest in the past, there is another consequential circumstance in his life which also had its effect. Every student of Lamb knows of the tragedy that entered the Lamb home in 1796. In a sudden fit of insanity that was the result of the constant care and worry over the whole family, Mary Lamb killed her mother. No longer was there to be a normal life for either Mary or Charles. Mary was pronounced insane and sent away. But Charles could not bear to think of his sister--the kind, loving sister who had been his life-long companion--living in a madhouse. He persuaded the authorities to turn her over to him, and he promised to take on himself all the care and devotion a brother could give. Charles was only twenty-two when he assumed this responsibility. Without a murmur, he gave up all other cares and pleasures for this one paramount duty of vigilance. His devotion to Mary was untiring. He gave her his love and suppressed his desire for a home and family. And desire we know there was, for Anne Simmons, alias Alice Winterton, of "Dream Children" fame, or for Hester, the lovely Quakeress of Islington, or for Fanny Kelly, the actress, to whom he once proposed in vain. The taint of madness in the family, Mary's condition, and the poor pay of the India House position combined to make marriage impracticable. Only in one "foolish" moment did Lamb make an offer of marriage to Miss

Kelly, with Mary's consent. But for the most part he discarded all such thoughts to care watchfully for Mary, and, what is even finer, he never eulogized himself for it. Nor did he often complain. Once, in a letter to Coleridge in 1800, he expressed a longing for relief from the burden of care and responsibility:

> . . . My heart is quite sunk, and I don't know where to look for relief. Mary will get better again, but her constantly being liable to such relapses is dreadful; nor is it the least of our evils that her case and all our story is so well known around us. We are in a manner *marked*. Escuse my troubling you, but I have nobody by me to speak to me. I slept out last night, not being able to endure the change and the stillness; but I did not sleep well, and I must come back to my own bed. I am going to try and get a friend to come and be with me tomorrow. I am completely shipwrecked. My head is quite bad. I almost wish that Mary were dead.[17]

But Lamb needed Mary and never really wished her dead. In writing to Miss Wordsworth he confesses how much Mary meant to him: "All my strength is gone, and I am like a fool bereft of her co-operation. . . . She is older and wiser and better than I, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness."[18]

I believe the tragedy of Charles and Mary Lamb was not merely the one violent act of 1796. It was this, and also the

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[17] Lamb, *op. cit.*, Letter, May 12, 1800, I, Chap. I, 178.

[18] *Ibid.*, Letter, June 14, 1805, I, Chap. II, 108.

whole lifetime of "dual loneliness" that was "in a manner marked." It must be remembered that the taint of insanity was in Charles as well as in Mary. In the Elia essay, "The Child Angel; A Dream," Lamb is describing himself as the child angel, who "was to know weakness, and reliance, and the shadow of human imbecility . . ."[19] Is it any wonder that a brother and sister both affected by this shadow should withdraw into themselves and have between them thoughts and love upon which the world of London and friends might not intrude? They were truly "living a daily tragedy." They talked together, took long walks through London to the theatres, and when Mary's fits of insanity forewarned them, they walked off hand in hand to the madhouse at Hoxton, weeping bitterly.

Having sequestered themselves from the world around them, and living under a shadow that forced them to avoid looking into themselves, it was natural that they should turn to recollections of their childhood as food for their thoughts. In his essay on "Recollections of Christ's Hospital," Lamb says:

> . . . For me, I do not know whether a constitutional imbecility does not incline me too obstinately to cling to the remembrances of childhood; in an inverted ratio to the usual sentiments of mankind, nothing that I have been engaged in since seems of any value or importance, compared to the colours which imagination gave to everything then.[20]

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[19] Ibid., "The Child Angel; A Dream," IV, 185.

[20] Ibid., "Recollections of Christ's Hospital," VI, 291-92.

It is notable that much of the material for his later writings came from his early days before the tragedy--from his boyhood in the Temple and the years at Christ's Hospital. Alfred Ainger has noted how touching are the tender memories and regrets which the lonely Lamb ventured to commit to the uncertain sympathies of the great public.[21] Lamb's release lay in his childhood; it was to scenes of infancy that he turned, scenes that brought him "quietness and a patient bearing of the yoke." Mary turned to the past with him, and Morley remarks that Lamb's escape into the past had Mary's sanction:

> . . . Antiquity was a game, and one of which Mary approved. I have the feeling that humour was, to Lamb, like drink--an escape which was not encouraged; but that the pursuit of antiquity was like cards--so long as it was only that, he could play as he liked.[22]

The tragedy also had a marked effect on Lamb's reading. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd has so well explained why, under the burden of his tragedy, Lamb turned to the seventeenth century writers, that I shall quote this critic at length:

> By the terrible realities of his experience, he was turned to seek a kindred interest in the "sterner stuff" of old tragedy--to catastrophes more fearful even than his own--to the aspects of "pale passion"--to shapes of heroic daring and more heroic suffering--to the agonising contests of opposing affections and the victories of the soul over calamity and death, which the old English drama discloses, and in the contemplation of which he saw his

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[21] Ibid., "Charles Lamb," VIII, 163.

[22] F. V. Morley, Lamb Before Elia, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), p. 252.

> own suffering nature at one once mirrored and exalted. Thus, instead of admiring, as he once admired, Rowe and Otway, even Massinger seemed too declamatory to satisfy him; in Ford, Decker, Marlowe and Webster, he found the most awful struggles of affection, and the "sad embroidery" of fancy-streaked grief, and expressed his kindred feelings in those little quintessences of criticism which are appended to the noblest scenes in his "Specimens."[23]

It is necessary to discuss briefly Lamb's religious attitude at this period, both because it was a result of the tragedy, and because it will help us to see more clearly the contrast between the Lamb of early years and the Elia he soon became. The tragedy at first moved Lamb to deep seriousness. He said in a letter to Coleridge: "I must be serious, circumspect, and deeply religious through life; and by such means may both of us escape madness in future, if it so please the Almighty."[24] He went to his Bible for comfort and solace. Again confiding in Coleridge, he suggests that his friend "write as religious a letter as possible, but no mention of what is gone and done with [the tragedy]. With me 'the former things are passed away,' and I have something more to do than to feel."[25]

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[23] Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, Memoirs of Charles Lamb, edited by Percy Fitzgerald (London: W. W. Gibbings, 1892), pp. 245-46.

[24] Lamb, op. cit., Letter, October 3, 1796, I, Chap. I, 52.

[25] Ibid., p. 45.

But this religious trend was not to last for long. More and more his mind turned from the deep questions and began to play on the surface of things. I think that perhaps Lamb became somewhat impatient with the deep philosophical musings of Coleridge. He said once that Mary and he were offended by Coleridge's freedom of expression that sounded more like pagan philosophy than genuine piety.[26] Perhaps this was part of the reason for the shift away from the religious. But an even stronger reason was that Lamb did not find the real faith he needed to enable him to bear his sorrow. The first shock of tragedy made him instinctively turn to religion and to God, but his faith was not strong enough nor his religion vital enough to help him. Hence, Lamb created a substitute: he began to assume a half-conscious pose of humorous unconcern. He made humor his religion, and at the same time he recognized that it was no religion at all. "I am determined my children shall be brought up in their father's religion, if they can find out what it is," Lamb declares to Chambers.[27] Just as we turn to God and depend on a faith in the Almighty to help us through sorrow, so, in a similar way, Lamb turned to the second self he had invented--the self of humor and wit and frolic and dreams--to ease his heartache.

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[26] _Ibid._, Letter, October 24, 1798, I, Chap. I. 55.

[27] _Ibid._, Letter, 1818, II, Chap. I. 26.

He would rather put aside religious thought, forget the serious, cover up deeper emotions with humor and whimsicality. "Nothing," he writes to Manning in 1810, "puzzles me more than time and space; and yet nothing puzzles me less, for I never think about them.[28] Sometimes, after this change of mood, Lamb would rail against religious dogmatism; sometimes serious hours of reflection would bring his misery to the surface; but usually these hours were drowned by fancy and humor and lively chatter. Lamb would not let his mind dwell on the great problem of his life. Reflecting on it only made him the sadder. Love and laughter became his solution, for he could forget his misery when he smiled.

But the discussion of this new side of Lamb is material for another chapter. We have observed those influences on Lamb's early life that directed his gaze into the past. Now the question arises--how did Lamb avoid musing on those tragic circumstances that were constantly associated with his memories?

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[28] *Ibid.*, Letter, January 10, 1818, I, Chap. II, 176.

CHAPTER III

"ELIA," A RETREAT FROM TRAGEDY

At the mention of the word "Elia," the first impression is probably related to the pseudonym of Charles Lamb behind which he has written the famous and charming essays that figure so prominently and uniquely in English literature. With few other authors are pen names and given names so closely associated or so often interchanged as are "Elia" and "Lamb." This, I am convinced, is due to the fact that, with Lamb, Elia was more than a pseudonym. It was to him first of all one part of a dual personality originating as a result of the calamities of his life. When Lamb began to write for the London Magazine, he assumed the pseudonym of Elia and under that pseudonym expressed mainly the Elia personality. His authorship made the qualities of this personality more distinct and conspicuous. Let us look first at the reasons why Lamb used the mystification of a pen name and then at the personality in back of the pseudonym.

The Pseudonym

The use of a pen name appealed to Lamb's love of mystification. It was a literary fashion adopted by the East India clerk for two main reasons. The first has to do with his brother John. When Lamb wrote "The South-Sea House," he tells John Taylor that:

> . . . having a brother now there, and doubting how he [John] might relish certain descriptions in it, I clapt down the name of Elia to it, which passed off pretty well, for Elia himself added the function of an author to that of a scrivener, like myself.[1]

Lamb did not want to offend his brother John, so he adopted the name of an Italian clerk with whom he had worked at the South-Sea House thirty years before. Lamb tells us in the letter quoted above that he later went to confess to the real Elia his usurpation of the name, but he had "died of consumption eleven months ago, and I knew not of it. So the name has fairly devolved to me, I think; and 'tis all he has left me."[2] But what a valuable possession that name became to Lamb!

When he began to write for the London Magazine, he needed suitable material for his essays, and he found that material in his own memories, prejudices, and beliefs. He fondled and displayed his ego before the public. But to one so sensitive as Lamb--one who wanted to hide and forget much

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[1] Lamb, op. cit., Letter to J. Taylor, July 30, 1821, II, Chap. I, 52.

[2] Loc. cit.

of the unhappiness that such material would bring to light--some form of concealment was necessary. Behind a pseudonym he could be very personal without embarrassment by stepping aside and eyeing himself from a detached point of view. One critic shows how the mask of a pseudonym aided Lamb as a familiar essayist:

> . . . thin as the mask was, it gave the rather shy Lamb freedom to inaugurate the familiar essay in English by bringing into the printed page all the wealth of his personal experience, his whimsical fancy, his undefended sympathies and antipathies.[3]

As Elia Lamb could be autobiographical and the public, unaware of the real author, would not misunderstand his feelings and opinions, or, better still, would not understand too much. He didn't care to have his personal misfortunes made a subject of common public talk.

If we ask whether Lamb has not erred in seeking refuge behind his new name, he answers, "And how shall the intenser dramatist escape[4] being faulty, who, doubtless under cover of passion uttered by another, oftentimes gives blameless vent to his most inward feelings, and expresses his own story modestly?"[5] Lamb's self-revelation is sincere, full of humor, charm,

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[3] Katherine Brégy, "An Essay on Elia," The Commonweal, 21:281, December 28, 1934, ~~p. 281~~.

[4] Underscoring mine.

[5] Lamb, op. cit., "A Character of the Late Elia," IV, xii.

deep emotion and understanding. It is realistic in that he can see himself as he really is. He laughs at his own weaknesses and foibles. In "A Character of the Late Elia" he is perfectly honest in his description:

> My late friend was in many respects a singular character. Those who did not like him, hated him; and some, who once liked him, afterwards became his bitterest haters. The truth is, he gave himself too little concern about what he uttered, and in whose presence. He observed neither time nor place, and would e'en out with what came uppermost. With the severe religionist he would pass for a free-thinker; while the other faction set him down for a bigot, or persuaded themselves that he belied his sentiments. Few understood him; and I am not certain that at all times he quite understood himself. He too much affected that dangerous figure--irony. He sowed doubtful speeches, and reaped plain, unequivocal hatred. He would interrupt the gravest discussion with some light jest; and yet, perhaps, not quite irrelevant in ears that could understand it.[6]

The foregoing quotation illustrates both Lamb's sincerity in describing himself and his love of mystification, in this case, by writing the essay as "a friend."

It is not always safe to take his statements as literal facts, for often they contain some fiction. Lamb once called his pseudonym an anagram of "a lie." This was true of its spelling and often nearly true of the facts because of our author's love of fictionalizing. He incessantly uses false names and places. He transcribes "Blakesware" into "Blakesmoor," and Mrs. Burney, whom he knew in Hertfordshire, receives the title of "Mrs. Battle." In the delightful "Old China" and

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[6] Loc. cit.

in "My Relations" Lamb refers to Mary as his cousin or as "Bridget Elia." But the story that he tells of their youth together and his description of her, leave us in no doubt as to her true identity. John, his older brother, becomes "James," his cousin, and Lamb declares, "Brother, or sister, I never had any--to know them."[7] Most of the characters in his essays are real people in disguise. At the close of "The South-Sea House" Lamb confesses:

> Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while?--peradventure the very names, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic--insubstantial--like Henry Pimpernel, and old John Naps of Greece:---
>
> Be satisfied that something answering to them has had a being. Their importance is from the past.[8]

Ralph Bigod, in "Two Races of Men," was really John Fenwick, as we learn in "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago," and the "Gentle Giantess" was a Mrs. Smith of Cambridge. Lamb shifts places with Coleridge in part of "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago." As Coleridge, he writes of himself and of incidents in his own life. In "Oxford in the Vacation" he makes the school of gay scholars look like the haunt of ghosts. Another hoax appears in the letter to Crabb Robinson of April 10, 1829. Lamb is pretending that Robinson's ills are all his own and the humor in this pretense must surely have cheered the

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[7] *Ibid.*, "My Relations," III, 138.

[8] *Ibid.*, "The South-Sea House," III, 12.

ailing friend of Lamb. So much wit and humor are revealed in this Elia mystification that I quote nearly the whole letter:

> I have these three days been laid up with strong rheumatic pains, in loins, back, shoulders. I shriek sometimes from the violence of them. I get scarce any sleep, and the consequence is, I am restless, and want to change sides as I lie, and I cannot turn without resting on my hands, and so turning all my body all at once, like a log with a lever. . . . I am ashamed to whine about these complaints to you, who can ill enter into them; but indeed they are sharp. You go about, in rain or fine, at all hours, without discommodity. I envy you your immunity at a time of life not much removed from my own. But you owe your exemption to temperance, which it is too late for me to pursue. I, in my lifetime, have had my good things. Hence my frame is brittle--yours strong as brass. I never knew any ailment you had. You can go out at night in all weathers, sit up all hours. Well, I don't want to moralise; I only wish to say that if you are inclined to a game at double-dumby, I would try and bolster myself in a chair for a rubber or so. My days are tedious, but less so, and less painful than my nights. May you never know the pain and difficulty I have in writing so much![9]

Even though Lamb enjoys hoaxes and touches of fiction, he never uses his half-lies to be dishonest or to wound another. He enjoyed his petty fictionalizing and it aided him in concealing the true identity of persons and things about which he wished to write. And since the most important of these was himself, Lamb's use of a pseudonym did much to hide from the public gaze facts and feelings too personal for it to see. Had his past life been painted in less sombre colors, perhaps Lamb would not have been driven to seek a hidden refuge for his identity in the form of a nom de guerre.

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[9] Ibid., Letter, April 10, 1829, II, Chap. II, 96-97.

The Personality

"Elia," however, is much, much more than a pseudonym. If we look closely at the adult Charles Lamb, we realize that the pen name was only an outward expression of the distinct personality that had become a second nature to him. When, about 1800, Lamb became conscious that he was pretending, that he was forming within himself a second reality, he did not restrain it, but rather elaborated it. His pretense was not a sudden change of personality, but a slowly-formed second self that began to take shape about the turn of the century, and gradually developed during the years (1801-1817) that he and Mary lived together at No. 4 Inner Temple Lane.

There has been a controversy about the distinction between Lamb and Elia. Some critics declare that there is a strong difference in the two personalities. Mr. F. V. Morley believes the difference to be deeply psychological, in his Lamb Before Elia. Others, notably Miss Edith Christina Johnson in Lamb Always Elia, say there is no distinction between the two. Mr. A. C. Ward thinks the Elia personality is merely a surface polish, but I believe that the gay, dreamy, witty character of Elia was deeper than a surface cloak of superficiality. P. G. Patmore's description of the face of Lamb presents, as I see them, the two conflicting natures in Lamb:

> There are lines of the loftiest thought and the purest wisdom, intersected by others traced by the hand of Folly herself while sporting there in her cap and bells. There

> is the deepest and the gentlest love for mankind, inextricably mingled with marks of the most bitter and biting contempt for men and their ways and works. . . . There is the profound melancholy of the poetic temperament, brooding fondly over the imagination of what it feels to be unattainable,--mixed into a "chance medley" of all sorts of quips, quibbles, and quiddities of the brain. There is the gravity of the sage contending with the gaiety of the humorist; the pride and solemnity of the philosophic observer of human nature, melting into the innocent playfulness of the child, and the mad fun of the schoolboy. In short . . . Charles Lamb's face, like his other attributes, amounts to a "contradiction in terms,"--with this special qualification in every particular of the case, that the contradiction is invariably in favour of right, of truth, and of good, wherever these are brought into momentary contention with their opposites.[10]

Distinguish them as you will--the frolic versus the gentle, Lamb versus Elia, humor versus pathos--both phases were intrinsic parts of the personality of this exquisite, tender life.

It is with the dreams and humor of the Elia personality that we shall concern ourselves in this chapter. We have seen that the serious, contemplative vein in Lamb kept before his mind too much of the distress that he would have preferred to obliterate. So, into his "second nature" Lamb retreated, especially when he reflected on the past. It was this second self, comprised of a dream world and the escape mechanism of humor, that I have chosen to call the "Elia personality."

Lamb needed something to take his mind off the sadness in his life. Elia opened a magic door in his soul through

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10 P. G. Patmore, My Friends and Acquaintances (London: Saunders and Otley, 1854), I, 12-14.

which he entered and took possession of a dream world in which he could enjoy the pleasures forbidden to his real life. He could go to Oxford University:

> I can here play the gentleman, enact the student. To such a one as myself, who has been defrauded in his young years of the sweet food of academic institution, nowhere is so pleasant, to while away a few idle weeks at, as one or other of the Universities. Their vacation, too, at this time of the year, falls in so pat with ours. Here I can take my walks unmolested, and fancy myself of what degree or standing I please. I seem admitted ad eundem. I fetch up past opportunities. I can rise at the chapel-bell, and dream that it rings for me.[11]

He could dream of owning a mansion, such as the one in Blakesware, with its---:

> . . . gallery of good old family portraits, which as I have gone over, giving them in fancy my own family name, one--and then another--would seem to smile, reaching forward from the canvas, to recognise the new relationship.[12]

And he goes on to pretend that all the luxuries and glories in the old house really belonged to him. Perhaps best of all he could dream of having a family--a dream such as the one he relates to us in "Dream Children: A Reverie." He is telling his two imaginary children, John and Alice of his own early holidays at the mansion in Blakesware, of Grandmother Field, of their Uncle John, and of how he himself courted and won their mother, "Alice W--n," when suddenly--

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[11] Lamb, op. cit., "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 15-16.

[12] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 7.

> . . . both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding, till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: "We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name"---.[13]

Lamb regrets his bachelor life, but no touch of bitterness can be found in this dream.

Lamb's Elia world was constructed within himself, and he put a guard at its door to keep out tragedy and problems and depression and bitterness. Everything in his world of dreams glowed with the sunshine of happiness to compensate for the clouds of material life. Outside of this dream world, his life had "much of the confusion, the trouble, and obscure perplexity, of an ill dream. In the day-time I stumble upon dark mountains."[14]

In addition to the dream world of the Elia personality is the quaint, mocking humor that became so much a part of Lamb. He describes Elia as "light, and vain, and humoursome; . . . a stammering buffoon . . ."[15] He often appeared to assume the mask of light-heartedness and humor, but it was a

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[13] Ibid., "Dream Children: A Reverie," III, 202.

[14] Ibid., "Confessions of a Drunkard," IV, 198.

[15] Ibid., "New Year's Eve," III, 55.

humor born of the dark, tragic experiences through which he had passed, born from a sensitive soul whose depths had been pierced with a melancholy which would have driven him to madness but for the saving device of humor. This tonic cheered him and brought infinite relief from the tragic thoughts that daily threatened his reason. In J. B. Priestley's English Humour is a beautiful and kindly passage on the pathos and humor of Lamb, which I quote in part:

> His humour was not an idle thing, but the white flower plucked from a most dangerous nettle. His adult life begins in tragedy, in Elizabethan crimson and black, murder and madness and despair. He comes swaying, a grave and sensitive youth, out of a great darkness. Henceforward his whole life must be deliberately controlled, dedicated to certain ends. He must walk down a narrow channel, where there is for him neither marriage nor children, neither personal freedom nor the promise of gratified ambition, a long straight way with a grave at the end of it. His days must be spent at the office desk, and his nights with that sister to whom his life was dedicated . . .
>
> We have to remember this long, straight, narrow way he walked when we consider his humour. He began with an apparent sad sanity that masked gulfs of madness. He ended with an apparent gay insanity, a devotion to pure whimsy, that masks an exquisite sanity, a balance of so many different and dangerous forces. There were always within him depths of suffering that he never consciously revealed, though behind many a phrase of his we catch a glimpse of the darkness.[16]

This deep humor, this squinting at life, lay very near to pathos. It is not the foolish boisterous fun of a caricaturist; it is rather charged with tenderness and kindliness and common

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[16] J. B. Priestley, English Humour (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), pp. 139-40.

sense and unselfishness. Gamaliel Bradford, in his analysis of Lamb's humor, compares Elia with Shakespeare's clown or court fool, who is the incarnation of a novel spiritual attitude. He is not a mere imbecile or the idle occasion of merriment which he hardly understands. His folly is not lack of intelligence, but lack of practical selfishness. "And is not this precisely Charles Lamb?" asks Bradford.[17] Lamb refused to indulge in self-pity; he never allowed himself to be carried away by his feelings. When they seemed to be getting the better of him, he would summon up Elia and laugh at his heartache or lose himself in a fanciful dream. Occasionally while writing he would be tempted into flights of pathos, but he abruptly turned away, and instead of giving in to self-pity and complete spiritual depression, he ran off to his second self, to that Elia who knew all the bitter dregs of his former life but could sweeten them with love and gaiety. Such a passage is in his "Old China." Elia and Bridget were looking back over the years and wishing "the good old times would come again," the times when they were poorer, when they could take long walks together, when they struggled to the top gallery of the theatre. As Bridget talks, we feel the pathos of these memories of a happier past, until Elia steps in to change the

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[17] Gamaliel Bradford, Bare Souls, (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1925), pp. 172-73.

regrets to thankfulness:

> That we had much to struggle with, as we grew up together, we have reason to be most thankful. It strengthened and knit our compact closer. We could never have been what we have been to each other, if we had always had the sufficiency which you now complain of.[18]

And he ends the essay with a burst of humorous exclamation over the picture on a piece of old china. Surely Elia preserved him from looking too closely into the dark chasm in his life.

The humor of Elia and the seriousness of Lamb are very closely woven together. Behind the jokes and jests and wit there is an underlying seriousness which gives to the lighter moments and matters, "among which he for the most part moved,"[19] a depth of feeling and expression, and we exclaim with Polonius, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

It was in private life that our tragic jester was more Lambian than Elian; it was there that the deeper seriousness held sway over the mockery and fun. Not that Lamb never made a pun or frolicked with Mary and his intimate friends. He often did, both in those quiet evening chats and in the many letters written to friends, of which the matter "usually compriseth three topics; news, sentiment, and puns."[20]

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[18] Lamb, "Old China," op. cit., IV, 181.

[19] Walter Pater, "Charles Lamb," Appreciations, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1927), p. 124.

[20] Lamb, op. cit., III, 204.

When comparing himself with the Quakers, he declares:

> . . . I am all over sophisticated--with humours, fancies, craving hourly sympathy. I must have books, pictures, theatres, chit-chat, scandal, jokes, ambiguities, and a thousand whim-whams, which their simpler taste can do without.[21]

The Elia self was always within him, and he could no more help punning than he could help breathing. But Lamb would lay aside his jesting more often in his private life. He hated concealment from his friends and loved to "give a faithful journal of what passes within me."[22] His friends understood, but the public might not.

In public and often in his writing, Lamb was open to the charge of seeming too gay, too mocking, too foolish, and of trying to court attention by such frolic. My answer to a charge like this is that the super-abundance of gaiety and mockery with which Lamb garnished his public relations was part of his very nature. It was not mere affectation. It expressed that Elia self within him which had come to be as inherent as the simple and serious Lamb personality of younger and private life. The one was as natural to him as the other. One might ask why this unique author did not more often speak out straight from his heart and express his misery, his regrets,

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[21] Ibid., "Imperfect Sympathies," III, 117-18.

[22] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, October 3, 1796, I, Chap. I, 48.

his longings. Why must he jest over his drunkenness, laugh at a pillory, sport with death and friendship and even with the taint of madness that haunted his life? The reason lies in the fact that Lamb never was a formal author. When he wrote, it was for fun and relaxation after long hours of doing little but adding figures. Literature to him was only an avocation to be enjoyed like a conversation, with friends. He would "throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth."[23] If he wrote from this angle, surely he had the right to jest about his relations, to chuckle over the Old Benchers, to ridicule the borrower who has a "contempt for money,--accounting it (yours and mine especially) no better than dross."[24] It was a means of easing the pain that lodged in his heart day and night. Who but Charles Lamb could have given us the lively delightful essays and letters brimming with whimsy, fancy, irony, and rollicking fun? And how could he thus have written if he had not faced his tragedy with the courage and light-heartedness and good sense that surges beneath the madcaps of amusement? Paul Elmer More writes:

> There is a time to look solemnly into the face of life, and then these letters and essays repel us, as they did Carlyle, with their ghastly London wit. There is a time for laughter and for quaint fancy that dallies lightly with

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[23] Ibid., "Imperfect Sympathies," III, 111.

[24] Ibid., "The Two Races of Men," III, 44.

> the emotions, and then we reflect on the sublime courage of this man who could smile where others would despair, and with Thackeray we lay his letters to our forehead, and call him Saint Charles. And the latter mood is wiser, on the whole, and safer and more just.[25]

I agree that Lamb was intensely courageous in facing his tragedy with humorous dallying, but I would call attention to the fact that this solution to his problem did not bring peace to his later years. It worked for a while, but in the end it failed him; and he himself says that he "stumbles about dark mountains at best."[26] Paul Elmer More again says:

> . . . All letters are sad as the writer approaches old age, but few are so strangely and unconsciously disturbing as Lamb's. As the burden of years closed in upon him and the buoyancy of spirit passed away, there came in its place a weary vacuity, a bleak mockery of wit, broken at times by a stammering cry of pain such as it is not good to hear.[27]

This "stammering cry of pain" we see in an essay in the "Popular Fallacies" series, written in 1826:

> . . . The drama has shut in upon us at the fourth act. We have nothing here to expect, but in a short time a sick-bed, and a dismisseal. We delight to anticipate death by such shadows as night affords. We are already half acquainted with ghosts. We were never much in the world. Disappointment early struck a dark veil between us and its dazzling illusions. Our spirits showed gray

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[25] Paul Elmer More, "Charles Lamb," Shelburne Essays, Second Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), p. 103.

[26] Lamb, op. cit., Letter to J. Taylor, July 30, 1821, II, Chap. I, 51.

[27] More, op. cit., p. 102.

> before our hairs. The mighty changes of the world already appear as but the vain stuff out of which dramas are composed. We have asked no more of life than what the mimic images in playhouses present us with. Even those types have waxed fainter. Our clock appears to have struck. We are SUPERANNUATED. . . We once thought life to be something; but it has unaccountably fallen from us before its time.[28]

Five years before he died, in a letter to Bernard Barton, Lamb confesses his loneliness in the absence of Mary, and we sense the distress of this man who hated change, but was "uprooted" so many times:

> . . . But town, with all my native hankering after it, is not what it was. The streets, the shops are left; but all old friends are gone! And in London I was frightfully convinced of this as I passed houses and places, empty caskets now. I have ceased to care almost about anybody. The bodies I cared for are in graves, or dispersed. My old clubs, that lived so long and flourished so steadily, are crumbled away. When I took leave of our adopted young friend at Charing Cross, 'twas heavy unfeeling rain, and I had nowhere to go. Home have I none, and not a sympathising house to turn to in the great city. Never did the waters of heaven pour down on a forlorner head. Yet I tried ten days at a sort of friend's house, but it was large and straggling,--one of the individuals of my old long knot of friends, card-players, pleasant companions, that have tumbled to pieces, into dust and other things; and I got home on Thursday, convinced that I was better to get home to my hole at Enfield, and hide like a sick cat in my corner.[29]

We wish that he might have solved his problem in a safer way for himself, but we admire the great courage of the man who could carry his sorrow and, for so many years, smile in spite of it.

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[28] Lamb, op. cit., "That We Should Rise with the Lark" ("Popular Fallacies"), IV, 235-36.

[29] Ibid., Letter to Bernard Barton, July 25, 1829, II, Chap. II, 104-105.

CHAPTER IV

LIVING IN THE PAST

> In my poor mind it is most sweet to muse
> Upon the days gone by; to act in thought
> Past seasons o'er, and be again a child...[1]

Charles Lamb, in this sonnet, "Childhood," expressed his love of musing on the past, of calling to mind things old and out-of-date but still sweet to his memory. We have seen that this reflective turn of mind came to him as a result of his early environment, of his work, and of the tragedy that dominated his life. We have seen how the Elia personality became to him a refuge from the bitter realities that were associated with his past, and how this second self enabled him to smile at sorrow, to look beyond tragedy to happier hours and brighter scenes. Through Elia he could gaze boldly into that past to which his tragedy forced him to turn. The present was of little concern to him both because of his tragedy and because contemporary affairs seemed much more lifeless and nonessential than the warm, golden memories of the past.

Before we study those things in the past which Lamb loved to recall, let us make some mention of his treatment of the contemporary age. His interest in the present was only occasional and secondary as far as politics and world affairs were concerned. While his friends took up one or another of

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[1] Lamb, op. cit., "Childhood," VI, 8.

the sides in political controversies, Lamb seemed indifferent. He did not like to have politics discussed at the Wednesday evening gatherings in his home. Hazlitt would sometimes become excited over an issue and would force some comments from Lamb, but for the most part, contemporary affairs were foreign matter to Elia. He meddled in politics off and on and probably would not have done that much if his intimate friends had been less interested in affairs. If he belonged to any party, it was that one favored by his friends--usually the Radical Party. Though few, his political verses are not to be overlooked. He expressed contempt for King George in "The Triumph of the Whale," "The Three Graves," "The Unbeloved," "A Coronation Ode," and others. "The Godlike" is a free paraphrase of the sort of praise given to George by his admirers. Lamb was proud of the caustic epigram, "To Sir James MacKintosh" even though it put an end to the Albion in 1801. He used politics only for sly humor and laughed at events that enraged his friends. He could see no harm in making sport with Mr. Pitt and other notable men, for, as he tells Manning, "'twould have been but giving a polish to lamp-black, not nigrifying a negro primarily."[2] Lamb often gossipped about London, but scarcely mentioned the affairs of England. If his works were our only history of the period, we would never know much about

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[2] Ibid., Letter, October 5, 1800, VI, Chap. I, 211.

the Napoleonic Wars. He mentioned Napoleon once to Southey in 1815:

> After all, Buonaparte is a fine fellow, as my barber says, and I should not mind standing bareheaded at his table to do him service in his fall. They should have given him Hampton Court or Kensington, with a tether extending forty miles round London.[3]

In a letter to Manning he showed how slight was his political interest:

> Public affairs--except as they touch upon me, and so turn into private,--I cannot whip up my mind to feel any interest in. I grieve, indeed, that War, and Nature, and Mr. Pitt, that hangs up in Lloyd's best parlour, should have conspired to call up three necessaries, simple commoners as our fathers knew them, into the upper house of luxuries; bread, and beer, and coals, Manning. But as to France and Frenchmen, and Abbé Sièyes and his constitutions, I cannot make these present times present to me. I read histories of the past, and I live in them; although, to abstract senses, they are far less momentous than the noises which keep Europe awake.[4]

Martin tells the story that Lamb once heard a butcher in Enfield talking about a change of ministry in London and "it struck him that he neither knew nor cared who was in and who was out."[5]

". . . In truth, he was a walking anachronism, and beneath his nineteenth-century waistcoat, pulsated a heart of the seventeenth century -- that of Sir Thomas Browne, perchance."[6]

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[3] Ibid., Letter, May 6, 1815, I, Chap. II, 227.

[4] Ibid., Letter, March 1, 1800, I, Chap. I, 174-75.

[5] Benjamin Ellis Martin, In the Footprints of Charles Lamb (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), pp. 43-44.

[6] Ibid., p. 44.

This detachment from current events assisted Lamb as an essayist. He was not a fighter over issues, but a contemplative philosopher--a much happier circumstance for a writer of essays, especially when that writer chooses to make his memories of the past the subject of his efforts.

In the present chapter we want to look at those objects in the past that gave such happy memories to Lamb. Our purpose here is not purely biographical. We are not analyzing the essays, letters, poems, and plays to cull from them any fact or detail that has a bearing on Lamb's life. Mr. E. V. Lucas has done this very completely in his monumental Life of Charles Lamb. Our plan is to show how Lamb revealed his love of the past in his writing. He recalled people he knew as a boy, places he loved and visited, books classic and old. He told Wordsworth in the letter of January 30, 1801:

> . . . The rooms where I was born, the furniture which has been before my eyes all my life, a book-case which has followed me about like a faithful dog (only exceeding him in knowledge), wherever I have moved, old chairs, old tables, streets, squares, where I have sunned myself, my old school,-- these are my mistresses.[7]

Instead of looking forward, Lamb invariably turned reflectively backward. Old associations form the very background of his essays. Glimpses of autobiography abound in all of his writings, but they are glimpses only, not a chronological narration of

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[7] Lamb, op. cit., Letter, January 30, 1801, I, Chap. II, 20.

places, and events. Lamb was not interested in writing his own history, but he showed how fond he was of reminiscing about his past life by the many memories of which he wrote. He says in the Elia essay "New Year's Eve:"

> I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; new books, new faces, new years,-- from some mental twist which makes it difficult in me to face the prospective. I ~~am~~ have almost ceased to hope; and am sanguine only in the prospects of other (former years). I plunge into foregone visions and conclusions. I encounter pell-mell with the past disappointments. I am armour-proof against old discouragements. I forgive, or overcome in fancy, old adversaries. I play over again *for love*, as the gamesters phrase it, games for which I once paid so dear.[8]

For the most part, Lamb "was not a worshipper of the customs and manners of old times, so much as of the tangible objects that old times have bequeathed to us; . . ."[9] Lamb's memories were mainly of old buildings and people and books-- "tangible objects." Only occasionally does he mention customs and manners. One of those instances is to be found in his essay on "Modern Gallantry," in which he compares modern with ancient manners and finds the balance in favor of the ancients. Another time he goes back to pick up the probable history of the custom of saying grace at meals and suggests that we apply

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[8] *Ibid*., "New Year's Eve," III, 54.

[9] Barry Cornwall, *Charles Lamb: A Memoir* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1866), p. 17.

this ancient custom of saying grace to book-reading as well as to eating.

More often, however, Lamb's memories were of things more tangible:

> . . . Whatever had lived long, or whatever had been associated with his early life, had received a sort of consecration. It was henceforth irremoveable from its place. London, and his favorite spot in London; the universities, old plays, old poems, old prose were things he clung to, and never abandoned. . .[10]

Often it was a small event or a tiny trifle that suggested to him a whole series of events in former days, and a chain of recollections of old friends and places. Such a trifle, Lamb has told us, was---". . . an old Play Bill, which I picked up the other day--I know not by what chance it was preserved so long--which tempts me to call to mind a few of the players, who make the principal figure in it."[11] And Lamb goes on to tell us of the actors whom he used to know and admire. Again, it was an obituary notice that brought back memories of a "dear old friend:"

> Among the deaths in our obituary for this month, I observe with concern "At his cottage on the Bath Road, Captain Jackson." The name and attribution are common enough; but a feeling like reproach persuades me that this could have been no other in fact than my dear old friend, who some five-and-twenty years ago rented a tenement, which he was pleased to dignify with the appellation here used, about a mile from Westbourn Green.

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[10] Thomas Craddock, op. cit., p. 212.

[11] Lamb, op. cit., "On Some of the Old Actors," III, 257.

> Alack, how good men, and the good turns they do us, slide out of memory, and are recalled but by the surprise of some such sad memento as that which now lies before us![12]

Later on, Sarah Burney's wedding reminded Lamb of his youth and of the disappointment of never having had a wedding of his own:

> . . . I like to make one at these ceremonies, which to us old people give back our youth in a manner, and restore our gayest season, in the remembrance of our own success, or the regrets, scarcely less tender, of our own youthful disappointments, in this point of settlement. On these occasions I am sure to be in good humour for a week or two after, and enjoy a reflected honeymoon.[13]

Here Lamb does not go on to prolonged reflection on his bachelorhood, as we might expect, but these few lines at the beginning of the essay make us feel that he was thinking of what he had missed as he goes on to describe the wedding. Twice it was sonnets from his own pen that brought to mind past days. In the dedication of his works to Coleridge in 1818, Lamb writes to his friend:

> Some of the sonnets, which shall be carelessly turned over by the general reader, may happily awaken in you remembrances, which I should be sorry should be ever totally extinct--the memory
>
> Of summer days and of delightful years--
>
> even so far back as to those old suppers at our old *********** [Salutation and Cat] Inn,--when life was fresh, and topics exhaustless,--and you first kindled in me, if not the power, yet the love of poetry, and beauty, and kindliness.--[14]

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[12] *Ibid.*, "Captain Jackson," IV, 71.

[13] *Ibid.*, "The Wedding," IV, 157.

[14] *Ibid.*, Dedication of *Works* to Coleridge, 1800, VI,xxx.

In a letter to Coleridge in December of 1796, Lamb, referring to the sonnet on Mrs. Siddons tells Coleridge:

> . . . That sonnet, Coleridge, brings afresh to my mind the time when you wrote those on Bowles, Priestley, Burke;--'twas two Christmases ago, and in that nice little smoky room at the *Salutation*, which is even now continually presenting itself to my recollection, with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, egg-hot, welsh-rabbit, metaphysics, and poetry.-"[15]

Perhaps the most delightful instance of a trifling object calling to mind many memories is in "Old China." Lamb, as Elia, was admiring with his--

> . . . cousin last evening, over our Hyson some of these *speciosa miracula* upon a set of extraordinary old blue china. . . and could not help remarking, how favourable circumstances had been to us of late years, . . . when a passing sentiment seemed to overshade the brows of my companion.[16]

Mary wished for the good old times, recalling the Pentonville period of their lives when money was more scarce, an old folio was a luxury, and a cheap theatre seat was greatly relished. How many happy recollections these two sharers of tragedy can see through a transparent piece of old blue china! And what a blessing it must have been to both of them to have these happy times to remember! Mary's taint of insanity seemed to increase her memory powers. Lamb wrote of Mary to Miss Fryer in 1834:

> . . . When she is not violent, her rambling chat is better to me than the sense and sanity of this world. Her heart

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[15] *Ibid.*, Letter, December 2, 1796, VI, Chap. I, 69-70.

[16] *Ibid.*, "Old China," IV, 175.

> is obscured, not buried; it breaks out occasionally; and one can discern a strong mind struggling with the billows that have gone over it. I could be nowhere happier than under the same roof with her. Her memory is unnaturally strong; and from ages past, if we may so call the earliest records of our poor life, she fetches thousands of names and things that never would have dawned upon me again, and thousands from the ten years she lived before me. What took place from early girlhood to her coming of age principally lives again (every important thing, and every trifle) in her brain, with the vividness of real presence. For twelve hours incessantly she will pour out without intermission all her past life, forgetting nothing, pouring out name after name to the Waldens, as a dream; sense and nonsense; truths and errors huddled together; a medley between inspiration and possession.[17]

Lamb expresses his own habit of reflection in the "New Year's Eve" essay:

> That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause: simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of myself; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn my back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favourite?[18]

The child Lamb became the hero of the dreams of the adult man. The friends, the homes, the schools, the books--all that delighted the child were the subjects of memories. Many of the very happiest recollections are of friends or acquaintances, and Lamb has put into his pictures of them so much lively detail and fond reminiscence that they become nearly as interesting and alive to us as they were to him.

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[17] Ibid., Letter, February 14, 1834, VII, Chap. II, 202-203.

[18] Ibid., "New Year's Eve," III, 56.

Memories of People

Where are they gone, the old familiar faces?

I had a mother, but she died, and left me,
Died prematurely in a day of horrors--
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.

I have had playmates, I have had companions,
In my days of childhood, in my joyful school-days--
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.

I have been laughing, I have been carousing,
Drinking late, sitting late, with my bosom cronies--
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.

I loved a love once, fairest among women.
Closed are her doors on me, I must not see her--
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.

Ghost-like, I paced around the haunts of my childhood.
Earth seem'd a desert I was bound to traverse,
Seeking to find the old familiar faces.

Friend of my bosom, thou more than a brother!
Why wert not thou born in my father's dwelling?
So might we talk of the old familiar faces.

How some they have died, and some they have left me,
And some are taken from me; all are departed;
All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.[19]

It is of these "old familiar faces" that we want to speak here. This famous poem was written by Lamb in 1798, just two years after the terrible calamity that entered his life. He was in a period of great depression over his mother's death and the estrangement of some of his friends. He was recalling a past that could never return. Had it been possible, Lamb would like to have lived again the days when the family circle

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[19] *Ibid.*, "The Old Familiar Faces," VI, 25-26.

was unbroken and his old friends were around him as usual. As it was he consoled himself with memories of his relatives and friends as they were in earlier years.

Throughout Lamb's life, it was his family that remained his first concern. He delights in presenting his relations to us, and even goes so far as to conjecture on his possible ancestry. The sonnet on "The Family Name" is a query about how the "gentle name" of Lamb came to be.

. . . .
Perchance some shepherd on Lincolnian plains,
In manners guileless as his own sweet flocks,
Received thee first amid the merry mocks
And arch allusions of this fellow swains.
Perchance from Salem's holier fields return'd,
With glory gotten on the heads abhorr'd
Of faithless Saracens, some martial lord
Took his meek title, in whose zeal he burn'd.
Whate'er the fount whence thy beginnings came,
No deed of mine shall shame thee, gentle name.[20]

He suggests a similar origin to the name in the essay on Blakesmoor: "And what if my ancestor at that date was some Damoetas,---feeding flocks, not his own, upon the hills of Lincoln--. . ."[21] There is some truth in the Lincolnshire part of this lineage, as Lamb's father was born in Lincoln. If the ancestor was a shepherd, it was a lowly beginning, to be sure, but Lamb adds in the same essay, "the pride of ancestry may be had on cheaper terms than to be obliged to an importunate race

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[20] Ibid., "The Family Name," VI, 114.

[21] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 6.

of ancestors."[22] If his real ancestors were not of noble birth, the boy Lamb could "have the feeling of gentility" by imagining that he "was the true descendant" of the owners of the Blakesware mansion.

Lamb would have missed many fond dreams and memories if it had not been that his Grandmother Field was housekeeper for fifty or sixty years at the fine old Plumer mansion in Blakesware. The Plumers were often away from their Hertfordshire home, and then Charles and Mary could visit their grandmother there. We shall note later on Lamb's fondness for the place itself, but he also often wrote of his Grandmother. In a poem written four years after her death in 1792, Lamb pays her a loving tribute:

> On the green hill top,
> . . . .
> The Grandame sleeps. A plain stone barely tells
> The name and date to the chance passenger.
> For lowly-born was she, and long had eat,
> Well-earned, the bread of service:-hers was else
> A mounting spirit, one that entertain'd
> Scorn of base action, deed dishonourable,
> Or aught unseemly. I remember well
> Her reverend image: I remember, too,
> With what a zeal she served her master's house;
> . . . .
> Better 'twere to tell,
> How with a nobler zeal, and warmer love,
> She served her heavenly Master. I have seen
> That reverend form bent down with age and pain,
> And rankling malady. Yet not for this
> Ceased she to praise her Maker, or withdraw

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[22] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire, IV, 5.

Her trust in Him, her faith, and humble hope;
So meekly had she learn'd to bear her cross--
For she had studied patience in the school
Of Christ; much comfort she had thence derived,
And was a follower of the NAZARENE.[23]

In this picture of Mrs. Field we are at once impressed with the noble character of one who had a strong influence on Charles' boyhood. In a letter to Coleridge at the time the poem was written, Lamb explains:

> You may think that I have not kept enough apart the ideas of her heavenly and her earthly master; but recollect I have designedly given in to her own way of feeling; and if she had a failing 'twas that she respected her master's family too much, not reverenced her Maker too little.[24]

Lamb seems to stress here the religious principles of his grandmother, and it may be partly a result of her influence that her grandson turned to religion when sorrow struck him. Perhaps touches of Lamb's grandmother may be seen in Mrs. Battle and in old Margaret Gray of Rosamund Gray, who "retained a spirit unbroken by calamity" and had "a principle within."[25] But this is only speculation. The best portrait of Mrs. Field is the very full one in "Dream Children." Just as Lamb here imagines that his would-be children might love to hear about their great-grandmother, so he himself enjoyed

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[23] Ibid., "The Grandame," VI, 9-10.

[24] Ibid., Letter, June 13, 1796, I, Chap. I, 32.

[25] Ibid., Rosamund Gray, VI, 212.

thinking of her as he grew older, and of all the pleasant scenes that her memory brought to mind.

> . . . Then I went on to say, how religious and how good their great-grandmother Field was, how beloved and respected by everybody, though she was not indeed the mistress of this great house, but had only the charge of it. . . And then I told how, when she came to die, her funeral was attended by a concourse of all the poor, and some of the gentry too, of the neighbourhood for many miles round, to show their respect for her memory, because she had been such a good and religious woman.[26]

Of Mrs. Field's daughter, Lamb's mother, we have less reference in Lamb's writings. He wrote almost nothing of any importance prior to the death of his mother in 1796, and every mention of her after that is colored with grief and regret. Within a few days after the "day of horrors" Lamb tells Coleridge how he was eating and drinking with some friends at home and suddenly realized that his mother, "who, through life, wished nothing but her children's welfare," was lying in the next room.[27] Remorse over his forgetfulness filled him, for Lamb had cherished his mother, and her death was the saddest of his memories. A letter to Coleridge in November of 1796 expresses his longing for his dead mother:

> . . . What would I give to call her back to earth for one day!--on my knees to ask her pardon for all those little asperities of temper which, from time to time, have given her gentle spirit pain!--and the day, my friend, I trust

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[26] Ibid., "Dream Children: A Reverie," III, 197-98.

[27] Ibid., Letter, October 3, 1796, I, Chap. I, 48

> will come. There will be "time enough" for kind offices of love, if "Heaven's eternal year" be ours.[28]

A poem full of loving regards came from Lamb's pen a year after her death:

> Thou should'st have longer lived, and to the grave
> Have peacefully gone down in full old age!
> Thy children would have tended thy gray hairs.
> We might have sat, as we have often done,
> By our fireside, and talk'd whole nights away,
> Old times, old friends, and old events recalling;
> With many a circumstance, of trivial note,
> To memory dear, and of importance grown.
> How shall we tell them in a stranger's ear.[29]

About the same time, addressing Mary, I believe, he writes:

> Thou, and I, dear friend,
> With filial recognition sweet, shall know
> One day the face of our dear mother in heaven;
> And her remember'd looks of love shall greet
> With looks of answering love; her placid smiles
> Meet with a smile as placid, and her hand
> With drops of fondness wet, nor fear repulse.[30]

"The Old Familiar Faces" was written, as we have said, when Lamb was mourning his mother's death. In 1818, when he reprinted this poem in his Works, he omitted the first stanza about his mother:

> Where are they gone, the old familiar faces?
>
> I had a mother, but she died, and left me,
> Died prematurely in a day of horrors--
> All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.[31]

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[28] Ibid., Letter, November 14, 1796, I, Chap. I, 67-8.

[29] Ibid., "Written Soon After the Preceding Poem," IV,23.

[30] Ibid., "Written a Year After the Events," VI, 21.

[31] Ibid., "The Old Familiar Faces," VI, 25.

This stanza on the "day of horrors" surely would have recalled vividly to Mary's mind the tragic actions of that September day, and Lamb had no desire to awaken memories that would be better dead.

Of Mary herself, Lamb wrote very tenderly. She had been the constant companion of his boyhood in the Temple and had given him a mother's care. The fact that Charles unhesitatingly gave up all his personal freedom to share her tragedy, indicates to us that she must have been no commonplace creature. She was sweet and serene even though she daily faced those visits of prolonged loneliness in the asylum. She and her younger brother were a source of much comfort and deep understanding sympathy to each other. Living under the shadow of insanity, they could remember the delights and charms of a youth together. Thus it was that most of Lamb's early memories were linked with those of his sister. We can be sure that Mary shared Lamb's delights at Margate on the sea, and in the first play he attended; that she figured clearly in his memories of the Temple and the Old Benchers; that she was one of the "we" who visited Grandmother Field on holidays as Lamb tells in "Dream Children;" that she enjoyed the paintings and tapestries with him in the old mansion at Blakesware; that she was his constant companion on such occasions as the one described in "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire." The opening words of that essay show Lamb's debt of gratitude to her:

> Bridget Elia has been my housekeeper for many a long year. I have obligations to Bridget, extending beyond the period of memory. We house together, old bachelor and maid, in a sort of double singleness.[32]

Later on in the same essay, he tells of her early reading in "good old English." (see page 8, Chapter II) The brother-sister tie was closer than usual in their family because of their joys and sorrows shared between them. As Lamb says in "Old China:"

> . . . That we had much to struggle with, as we grew up together, we have reason to be most thankful. It strengthened and knit our compact closer. We could never have been what we have been to each other, if we had always had the sufficiency which you now complain of.[33]

Lamb often refers to the great debt of gratitude that he owes to Mary for the tender companionship she gave him. Writing to Dorothy Wordsworth he says of Mary:

> . . . She would share life and death, heaven and hell, with me. She lives but for me; and I know I have been wasting and teasing her life for five years past incessantly with my cursed drinking and ways of going on. But even in this upbraiding of myself I am offending against her, for I know that she has cleaved to me for better, for worse; and if the balance has been against her hitherto, it was a noble trade.[34]

Throughout his correspondence are many references to Mary. We would expect this, since she was the only loved one with him till his death. We find her mentioned in letters to Coleridge

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[32] Ibid., "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," III, 147.

[33] Ibid., "Old China," IV, 181.

[34] Ibid., Letter, June 14, 1805, I, Chap. II, 108-109.

at the time of the tragedy, and Lamb often breaks out in expressions of loneliness over the "sad large pieces it [her visits to the asylum] cuts out of life."[35] Without her Lamb felt that his "hourly prop" had fallen from him and he would "totter and stagger with weakness," for nobody could take her place.[36] Writing of her on Christmas Day in 1797, Lamb shows his feeling about her:

> I am a widow'd thing, now thou art gone!
> Now thou art gone, my own familiar friend,
> Companion, sister, helpmate, counsellor![37]

Lamb says that his mother never rightly understood Mary, "never could believe how much she loved her; but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness and repulse."[38] Their Grandmother Field also was unsympathetic toward Mary and used to ask her what "'those poor crazy moythered brains'" of hers were thinking of always.[39] But Lamb was "wedded to the fortunes of his sister," and we know that he loved and appreciated her sincerely. In concluding the comments on Mary, we quote the lovely sonnet, "To My Sister," written in May of 1796, four months before the tragedy

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[35] Ibid., Letter, June 7, 1809, I, Chap. II, 166.

[36] Ibid., Letter to Thomas Manning, May 17, 1800, I, Chap. I, 179.

[37] Ibid., "Written on Christmas Day," 1797," VI, 24.

[38] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, October 17, 1796, I, 54.

[39] Loc. cit.

occurred. It well expresses Lamb's love for Mary and his memories of the kind of sister she had always been:

> If from my lips some angry accents fell,
> Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,
> 'Twas but the error of a sickly mind
> And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well
>   And waters clear of Reason; and for me,
>   Let this my verse the poor atonement be--
>   My verse, which thou to praise wert e'er inclined
>   Too highly, and with a partial eye to see
> No blemish. Thou to me didst ever show
>   Kindest affection; and would'st oft-times lend
>   An ear to the desponding love-sick lay,
>   Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay
> But ill the mighty debt of love I owe,
>   Mary, to thee, my sister and my friend.[40]

Lamb had other brothers and sisters, but only three grew to adulthood. His brother John was the third. Charles' early memories are less associated with John than with Mary, for John was older and not too much interested in his family. We see his character in "My Relations:"

> . . . The genuine child of impulse, the frigid philosopher of prudence--the phlegm of my cousin's doctrine is invariably at war with his temperament, which is high sanguine. With always some fire-new project in his brain, J. E. is the systematic opponent of innovation, and crier down of everything that has not stood the test of age and experiment. . . With a touch of the eccentric in all which he does or says, he is only anxious that you should not commit yourself by doing anything absurd or singular. . .
>
> His youth was fiery, glowing, tempestuous--and in age he discovereth no symptom of cooling. This is that which I admire in him.[41]

We have also a fine recollection of John in "Dream Children."

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[40] Ibid., "To My Sister," I, Chap. I, 5.

[41] Ibid., "My Relations," III, 139-140, 142.

Here we can see the type of character he was and Charles' love for him, though he bore none of the responsibility of the family tragedy:

> . . . Then, in somewhat a more heightened tone, I told how, though their great-grandmother Field loved all her grandchildren, yet in an especial manner she might be said to love their uncle, John L----, because he was so handsome and spirited a youth, and a king to the rest of us; and, instead of moping about in solitary corners, like some of us, he would mount the most mettlesome horse he could get, when but an imp no bigger than themselves, and make it carry him half over the country in a morning, and when he died. . . I missed his kindness, and I missed his crossness, and wished him to be alive again, to be quarrelling with him (for we quarrelled sometimes). . .[42]

Lamb could look at all the faults and failings of his brother and love him in spite of them. John, being the eldest child and preferred over the others by his mother and grandmother, became proud and domineering in his family relations. He probably felt that he would be the most successful and accomplished of the Lamb children. As a child he was selfish and craving and as a man he was a burly, easy-going bachelor. In the poem written to him in later life by his younger brother, we can read between the lines that pleasure-loving John had missed the deeper meaning in life:

> John, you were figuring in the gay career
> Of blooming manhood with a young man's joy,
> When I was yet a little peevish boy--
> . . . . 'Tis man's worst deed

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[42] Ibid., "Dream Children: A Reverie," III, 200-201.

> To let the "things that have been" run to waste,
> And in the unmeaning present sink the past. . .[43]

Of his father, Lamb writes fondly in "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple." Mr. John Lamb was assistant to Samuel Salt of the Inner Temple. This position included the offices of servant, dresser, friend, guide, auditor, treasurer, and, in fact, any job that was required by Salt. He had a comfortable post there and did his many jobs well. In this picture of him, as Lovel, we can see where Charles got some of his versatility and tenderness and chivalry:

> I knew this Lovel. He was a man of an incorrigible and losing honesty. A good fellow withal, and "would strike." In the cause of the oppressed he never considered inequalities, or calculated the number of his opponents. He once wrested a sword out of the hand of a man of quality that had drawn upon him, and pommelled him severely with the hilt of it. The swordsman had offered insult to a female--an occasion upon which no odds against him could have prevented the interference of Lovel. He would stand next day bareheaded to the same person modestly to excuse his interference--for L. never forgot rank where something better was not concerned. L. was the liveliest little fellow breathing, . . . made punch better than any man of his degree in England; had the merriest quips and conceits; and was altogether as brimful of rogueries and inventions as you could desire. He was a brother of the angle, moreover, and just such a free, hearty, honest companion as Mr. Isaak Walton would have chosen to go a-fishing with.[44]

In his old age, Charles Lamb's father became quite a burden to

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[43] Ibid., "To John Lamb, Esq., of the South-Sea House," VI, 114-15.

[44] Ibid., "Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 178-79.

his son, for he was ailing and would demand that Charles play cribbage with him every evening after a long day's work at the India House. But Lamb, as always, accepted this as part of his responsibility and put his own wishes second.

Another member of the Lamb household was Aunt Hetty, or Sarah Lamb, the unmarried sister of John Lamb. She seems to have been on very intimate terms with her younger nephew, and was kind and loving to him. Charles writes of her in "My Relations:"

> I had an aunt, a dear and good one. She was one whom single blessedness had soured to the world. She often used to say, that I was the only thing in it which she loved; and, when she thought I was quitting it, she grieved over me with mother's tears. A partiality quite so exclusive my reason cannot altogether approve. She was from morning till night poring over good books, and devotional exercises. Her favourite volumes were, Thomas à Kempis, in Stanhope's translation; and a Roman Catholic Prayer Book, . . . she was a steadfast, friendly being, and a fine old Christian. She was a woman of strong sense, and a shrewd mind--extraordinary at a repartee; one of the few occasions of her breaking silence--else she did not much value wit. The only secular employment I remember to have seen her engaged in, was, the splitting of French beans . . .[45]

The story of "The Witch Aunt" in Mrs. Leicester's School contains a description of an aunt that corresponds with that just quoted:

> . . . As I was often left at home with her, and as my serious disposition so well agreed with hers, an intimacy grew up between the old lady and me, and she would

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[45] Ibid., "My Relations," III, 137-38.

> often say that she loved only one person in the world and that was me. . . But there was an oddness, a silence about my aunt, which was never interrupted but by her occasional expressions of love to me, that made me stand in fear of her. An odd look from under her spectacles would sometimes scare me away when I had been peering up in her face to make her kiss me. Then she had a way of muttering to herself, which, though it was good words and religious words that she was mumbling, somehow I did not like.[46]

He also tells of her special kindness to him when he was at Christ's Hospital. She would cook tempting delicacies in the kitchen at home and bring them to him. He describes her "squatting down upon some odd stone in a by-nook of the cloisters, disclosing the viands," and he remembers that this often embarrassed him before his schoolmates.[47] On February 13, 1797, Lamb writes Coleridge that he attended the funeral of her who was to him the "cherisher of infancy." On the same day he wrote a poem of farewell to Aunt Hetty, part of which I quote as his last recollection of her:

> Thou too art dead, ... ! very kind
> Hast thou been to me in my childish days,
> Thou best good creature. I have not forgot
> How thou didst love thy Charles, when he was yet
> A prating schoolboy: . . . .
> Farewell, good aunt![48]

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[46] Ibid., "The Witch Aunt," Mrs. Leicester's School, IV, 362.

[47] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 25.

[48] Ibid., "Written on the Day of My Aunt's Funeral," VI, 19-20.

Of the two girls whom Lamb was known to have loved in his youth, he records some memories. He has written several sonnets to Anne Simmons (Alice Winterton), the fair-haired girl whom he met in Hertfordshire. In one sonnet on this love, he dreams of the walks in "a lonely glade" with Anne, and wonders if they were real and if she still wanders there.[49] In another sonnet he tells of paying a visit to these well-loved scenes:

> I pass'd the little cottage which she loved,
> The cottage which did once my all contain;
> It spake of days which ne'er must come again,
> Spake to my heart, and much my heart was moved.
> "Now fair befall thee, gentle maid!" said I,
> And from the cottage turn'd me with a sigh.[50]

Of these sonnets, Lamb tells Coleridge in 1796 that they are "reflected images" of his own feelings. Perhaps there is some recollection of this former love in Lamb's description of Rosamund Gray as found in Chapter III of that story. The charm and grace and sweetness and yellow hair certainly make us think of Anne.

On the death of Hester, the Quaker maid of Islington, Lamb, in 1803, wrote a poem. I quote three stanzas:

> When maidens such as Hester die,
> Their place ye may not well supply,
> Though ye among a thousand try,
> With vain endeavor.

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[49] *Ibid.*, Sonnet III, Vol. VI, 1.

[50] *Ibid.*, Sonnet V, Vol. VI, 1-2.

. . . .
A springy motion in her gait,
A rising step, did indicate
Of pride and joy no common rate,
That flush'd her spirit.
. . . .
Her parents held the Quaker rule,
Which doth the human feeling cool,
But she was train'd in Nature's school,
Nature had blest her.[51]
. . . .

The memories next dearest to Lamb were probably of his school friends. Samuel Taylor Coleridge remained one of Lamb's best friends from the period of their Christ's Hospital life. In the essay on the Blue-coat School, Lamb, speaking as Coleridge, writes:

> I was a poor friendless boy. My parents, and those who should care for me, were far away. . . and I felt myself alone among six hundred playmates.
>
> O the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early homestead! The yearnings which I used to have towards it in those unfledged years! How, in my dreams, would my native town (far in the west) come back, with its church, and trees, and faces! How I would wake weeping, and in the anguish of my heart exclaim upon sweet Calne in Wiltshire![52]

In the same essay, Lamb gives a fine passage of regret over those days at school and of Coleridge as he was then:

> Come back into memory, like as thou wert in the day-spring of thy fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee--the dark pillar not yet turned--Samuel Taylor Coleridge--Logician, Metaphysician, Bard!--How

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[51] Ibid., "Hester," VI, 94.

[52] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 26.

> have I seen the casual passer through the Cloisters stand still, entranced with admiration . . . to hear thee unfold, in thy deep and sweet intonations, the mysteries of Jamblichus, or Plotinus . . . or reciting Homer in his Greek, or Pindar---while the walls of the old Grey Friars re-echoed to the accents of the inspired charity-boy![53]

In the year 1794, Lamb and Coleridge spent many evenings talking at the Salutation and Cat Inn in Newgate Street. Lamb recalls these in a letter to his friend in 1796: "I have been drinking egg-hot and smoking Oronooko (associated circumstances, which ever forcibly recall to my mind our evenings and nights at the Salutation)."[54] The friendship between Lamb and Coleridge remained unbroken save for a short period from 1798 to 1800. But Lamb always held his friend in high esteem. He needed friends, especially the kind in whom he could confide, and Coleridge was one of these.

Valentine Le Grice, Bob Allen, Joseph Favell, and Samuel Le Grice, all old schoolmates, are described in the Christ's Hospital essay. Lamb mentions the quick wit and invention of Valentine Le Grice in his wit-combats with Coleridge; the cordial laugh of Allen; the sweet, sanguine nature of Samuel Le Grice; and the doggedness, faithfulness and warm-heartedness of Favell. In "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years

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[53] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 41-42.

[54] Ibid., Letter, June 14, 1796, I, Chap. I, 35.

Ago" Lamb also tells us that Bob Allen was dismissed from his position as paragraph-writer for the Oracle because his jokes were "deficient in point." Jem White, another schoolmate, is immortalized in "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" as the one who instituted an annual feast of chimney sweepers for the poor youths who worked so faithfully at this unpleasant task. At the close of the essay Lamb adds: "James White is extinct, and with him these suppers have long ceased. He carried away with him half the fun of the world when he died--of my world at least."[55]

Most of the memories of people that follow are of character types, but are clearly drawn because Lamb had real people in mind. As we read his memories of them we can think of persons of our own acquaintance who seem to fit the picture perfectly. For instance, a poor male relative is most cleverly portrayed in "Poor Relations." I quote in part:

> . . . He entereth smiling and--embarrassed. He holdeth out his hand to you to shake, and--draweth it back again. He casually looketh in about dinner-time--when the table is full. He offereth to go away, seeing you have company --but is induced to stay. He filleth a chair, and your visitor's two children are accommodated at a side-table . . . He calleth you by your Christian name, to imply that his other is the same with your own. He is too familiar by half, yet you wish he had less diffidence . . . When the company break up, he proffereth to go for a coach--and lets the servant go. He recollects your

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[55] Ibid., "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers," III, 222.

> grandfather; and will thrust in some mean and quite unimportant anecdote of the family. He knew it when it was not quite so flourishing as "he is blest in seeing it now.[56]

We know that Lamb had a definite model for this drawing, because later in the essay he describes an aged gentleman, a friend and schoolfellow of Lamb's father, who appeared at their house every Saturday. But even worse than such a nuisance, says Lamb, is a poor female relative:

> There is a worse evil under the sun, and that is--a female Poor Relation. You may do something with the other; you may pass him off tolerably well; but your indigent she-relative is hopeless. "He is an old humourist," you may say, "and affects to go threadbare. His circumstances are better than folks would take them to be. You are fond of having a Character at your table, and truly he is one." But in the indications of female poverty there can be no disguise. No woman dresses below herself from caprice. The truth must out without shuffling. "She is plainly related to the L---s; or what does she at their house?" She is, in all probability, your wife's cousin. Nine times out of ten, at least, this is the case.--Her garb is something between a gentlewoman and a beggar, yet the former evidently predominates. She is most provokingly humble, and ostentatiously sensible to her inferiority.[57]

These memories of Lamb's surely call to our minds recollections of very similar relatives whom we could not describe without a touch of humor, for, as Lamb says, "this theme of poor relationship is replete with so much matter for tragic as well as comic associations, that it is difficult to keep

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[56] Ibid., "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers," III, 222.

[57] Ibid., "Poor Relations," IV, 15-16.

the account distinct without blending."[58]

Lamb gives us a delightfully attractive picture of old age in his recollections of the Benchers whom he knew so well as a child living in the Temple Court. They were the "Old Worthies" on whom Charles and Mary gazed with awe as they played on the terrace and in the gardens. With a few well-chosen details, Lamb gives us vivid pictures of some of them. We can imagine how the Lamb children feared Thomas Coventry, of the parsimonious habits and having the "aspect of a strong-box." You might jostle others on the terrace, but not Coventry,--

> . . . the scarecrow of his inferiors, the browbeater of equals and superiors, who made a solitude of children wherever he came, for they fled his insufferable presence, as they would have shunned an Elisha bear.[59]

His coeval, Samuel Salt, we know as the kind benefactor who secured places for Charles in Christ's Hospital and in the East India House, of which place he was a governor. Here we see him as a man of unruffled temper and pensive gentility, who got credit for more than he deserved:

> . . . He was a shy man; a child might pose him in a minute--indolent and procrastinating to the last degree. Yet men would give him credit for vast application, in spite of himself. He was not to be trusted with himself

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[58] Ibid., "Poor Relations," IV, 15-16.

[59] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 174.

with impunity.[60]

Lovel we have already mentioned and described as Lamb's father. But of the other Benchers, Lamb writes thus:

> . . . P. [Peter Pierson] was a benevolent, but not a prepossessing man. He had that in his face which you could not term unhappiness; it rather implied an incapacity of being happy. His cheeks were colourless, even to whiteness. . . Contemporary with these, but subordinate, was Daines Barrington--another oddity--he walked burly and square--[and poisoned the sparrows] . . . Next to him was old Barton--a jolly negation. . . Read, good-humoured and personable--Twopeny, good-humoured, but thin, and felicitous in jests upon his own figure. If T. was thin, Wharry was attenuated and fleeting. Many must remember him (for he was rather of later date) and his singular gait, which was performed by three steps and a jump regularly succeeding. . . His features were spiteful. . . Jackson--the omniscient Jackson he was called--was of this period. He had the reputation of possessing more multifarious knowledge than any man of his time. He was the Friar Bacon of the less literate portion of the Temple. I had almost forgotten Mingay with the iron hand. . . He was a blustering, loud-talking person . . . Baron Maseres, who walks (or did till very lately) in the costume of the reign of George the Second, closes my imperfect recollections of the old benchers of the Inner Temple.[61]

All of these men are seen in the haze of affectionate reminiscence, and at the close of the essay we find Lamb wishing again for those days when the Benchers, hands folded behind them, paced the sacred terrace of the Temple. Before leaving the Old Benchers, we refer to a letter from Lamb to Crabb Robinson on January 20, 1827, which has been called "The Death-

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[60] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 174.

[61] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 180-183.

Bed" sketch. It is mainly a memory of Randal Norris, Sub-Treasurer of the Inner Temple and friend of the Lambs. I quote it in part:

> . . . In him I have a loss the world cannot make up. He was my friend and my father's friend all the life I can remember. I seem to have made foolish friendships ever since. Those are friendships which outlive a second generation. Old as I am waxing, in his eyes I was still the child he first knew me. To the last he called me Charley. He was the last link that bound me to the Temple. You are but of yesterday. In him seem to have died the old plainness of manners and singleness of heart.[62]

The next memories of people who are really types would, in point of time, be those of Mr. William Bird, teacher in the Bird Academy which Charles attended, and of his assistant, Captain Starkey. Mr. Bird was an eminent writer and teacher of languages and mathematics, Lamb says in the essay, "Captain Starkey." He goes on:

> I well remember Bird. He was a squat, corpulent, middle-sized man, with something of the gentleman about him, and that peculiar mild tone--especially while he was inflicting punishment--which is so much more terrible to children than the angriest looks and gestures.[63]

His assistant is described from details given by Mary Lamb, who knew him at the Academy:

> . . . Starkey appears to have been one of those mild spirits, which, not originally deficient in understanding, are crushed by penury into dejection and feebleness. He might have proved a useful adjunct, if not an ornament,

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[62] Ibid., Letter, January 20, 1827, II, Chap. II, 3-4.

[63] Ibid., "Captain Starkey," VII, 113.

> to society, if Fortune had taken him into a very little fostering; but, wanting that, he became a captain,--a by-word;--and lived and died a broken bulrush.[64]

Other teachers, whom young Charles had at Christ's Hospital, were Matthew Field and James Boyer, who are contrasted in "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago." First, Matthew Field:

> Matthew Field belonged to that class of modest divines who affect to mix in equal proportion the gentleman, the scholar, and the Christian; but, I know not how, the first ingredient is generally found to be the predominating dose in the composition. He was engaged in gay parties, or with his courtly bow at some episcopal levee, when he should have been attending upon us.[65]

Field was Lamb's teacher, and we can see why the boy liked his years at Christ's Hospital so much when we look at Boyer:

> . . . He had two wigs, both pedantic, but of different omen. The one serene, smiling, fresh powdered, betokening a mild day. The other, an old discoloured, unkempt, angry caxon, denoting frequent and bloody execution. Woe to the school, when he made his morning appearance in his passy, or passionate wig.[66]

Life at the Hospital was a happy memory to Lamb, part of the reason being that he fortunately was a pupil of Field.

As to people remembered from his vacations, Lamb gives us the poem, "Going or Gone," written in 1827. There are descriptions of some of his friends in Widford village near

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[64] Ibid., "Captain Starkey," VII, 117.

[65] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 36.

[66] Ibid., "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," III, 38.

Blakesware. According to Lucas, the Ben Carter mentioned was the gardener at Blakesware, and Betsy Chambers was Mrs. Reynolds, Lamb's first schoolmistress. She visited Lamb from time to time during his life, and he finally gave her a pension out of sympathy for her. Her maiden name was Chambers.

From a visit to Margate with Mary, Lamb recalls a dark-complexioned young man aboard the Margate Hoy who told unimaginable tales:

> . . . He was, in fact, the greatest liar I had met with then, or since. He was none of your hesitating, half-story-tellers . . . but one who committed downright, daylight depredations upon his neighbour's faith.[67]

What was most remarkable about him was that he told of marrying a princess, of seeing a phoenix, of sailing through the legs of the Colossus at Rhodes, and related all these so candidly that all believed him.

For a pattern of consistent gallantry, we have Joseph Paice, Lamb's employer prior to his entrance into the South-Sea House. Lamb immortalized him with these words:

> . . . I have seen him stand bareheaded--smile if you please--to a poor servant-girl, while she has been inquiring of him the way to some street--in such a posture of unforced civility, as neither to embarrass her in the acceptance, nor himself in the offer, of it.[68]

From Paice's employment, Lamb took up a position in the

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[67] Ibid., "The Old Margate Hoy," IV, 49.

[68] Ibid., "Modern Gallantry," III, 164.

South-Sea House, and his first Elia essay contains recollections of his fellow-clerks, who were old-fashioned bachelors and humorists with many queer habits and oddities.

> . . . Hence they formed a sort of Noah's ark. Odd fishes. A lay-monastery. Domestic retainers in a great house, kept more for show than use. Yet pleasant fellows, full of chat--and not a few among them had arrived at considerable proficiency on the German flute.[69]

Individually, there was Evans, "melancholy as a gib-cat," and with his hair "powdered and frizzed out;" Thomas Tame, who had the air and stoop of a nobleman but an "intellect of the shallowest order;" John Tipp, who screamed and scraped "most abominably" with his fiddle at home, but whose actions at the office "seemed ruled with a ruler;" Henry Man, "the wit, the polished man of letters," of the firm; Plumer, the engaging clerk who sang gloriously.[70]

A few other scattered memories of characters deserve brief mention. There is single-minded Mrs. Battle, player of whist:

> . . . She took, and gave, no concessions. She hated favours. She never made a revoke, nor ever passed it over in her adversary without exacting the utmost forfeiture. She fought a good fight: cut and thrust. She held not her good sword (her cards) "like a dancer." She sate bolt upright; and neither showed you her cards, nor desired to see yours.[71]

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[69] *Ibid.*, "The South-Sea House," III, 5.

[70] *Ibid.*, "The South-Sea House," III, 5 *et sqq*.

[71] *Ibid.*, "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist," III, 63-64.

Mrs. Burney, wife of Captain Burney, probably was the original of Sarah Battle. Lamb shows his kindly observation in the picture of Captain Jackson. We know nothing of this man beyond what Lamb tells us in the Elia essay. He was a retired, half-pay officer who could make a meagre dinner seem like great bounty, and hide his great poverty by making little appear to be much.

Lamb loved to dwell on the recollections of the actors who had passed from the stage. As he lists them in the essay, "On Some of the Old Actors" and describes them from memory, we feel that Lamb must have been an appreciative play-goer.

Lamb had what he called some "imperfect sympathies." He disliked Frenchmen, preachers, pedants, philanthropists, learned women, and prosaic people. In his judgments of people there is an "instinctive rightness of tact, with just enough prejudice to give his opinions savour."[72] He probably never hated a Scotchman or a philanthropist, but we are glad he did not "like all people alike." His dislikes add more flavor and zest to his likes, and both give a deep warmth to these memories.

Lamb made many friends during his life because he

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[72] John W. Dodds, "The Sanity of Charles Lamb," Sewanee Review, 42:493, October-December, 1934.

loved men. He reverenced their abilities, sympathized with their tastes, and laughed about their faults. And the result was that he drew many around him who later brought happy memories to him.

But with all these memories of people we have not yet mentioned Lamb's memories of himself. To try to put here the full story of his childhood as he gives it to us, would amount to a fairly complete edition of the Elia essays, with many letters and poems in addition. Lamb tells parts of his story as the mood strikes him. It is true that of himself, his own personal traits and habits as a child, Lamb is sparing. He can write pages on the character of Mary as a child or on a description of his Temple home. But we learn of him only as he has relation to these.

We have, however, some details given to us about the child Lamb that will bear special comment here. As he describes the Temple in the essay on the Old Benchers, he tells us that his early years were spent in this environment. He describes the men he knew there, and the buildings and gardens, but gives us only one comment on his connection with them, which I have quoted on page 7 in Chapter II. Of his life at Christ's Hospital, we quoted some comments in the same chapter. In "Witches and Other Night Fears" he analyzes his feelings as a child:

> I was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors. The night-time, solitude, and the dark, were my hell. The sufferings I endured in this nature would justify the expression. I never laid my head on my pillow, I suppose, from the fourth to the seventh or eighth year of my life--as far as memory serves in things so long ago--without an assurance, which realized its own prophecy, of seeing some frightful spectre.[73]

A similar instance of nervous fear is described in "Blakesmoor in H---shire:"

> The solitude of childhood is not so much the mother of thought as it is the feeder of love, of silence, and admiration. So strange a passion for the place possessed me in those years, that, though there lay--I shame to say how few roods distant from the mansion--half hid by trees, what I judged some romantic lake, such was the spell which bound me to the house, and such my carefulness not to pass its strict and proper precincts, that the idle waters lay unexplored for me; and not till late in life, curiosity prevailing over elder devotion, I found, to my astonishment, a pretty brawling brook had been the Lacus Incognitus of my infancy.[74]

Such comments on his own character however, are few. "A Character of the Late Elia" describes, not the child Lamb, but the man as he was at the time he was writing. Hence, it would not come under the class of memories. If then, Lamb writes of himself as a child only indirectly, and if we see him mostly through his descriptions of other people and places, we cannot accuse him of vanity or conceit. The sweet sincerity and perfect simplicity of these recollections must endear them

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[73] Lamb, op. cit., "Witches and Other Night Fears," III, 126.

[74] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 4.

to any who otherwise would judge them egotistical. But Lamb tells us, "Egotistical they have been pronounced by some," but only by those who "did not know, that what he tells us, as of himself, was often true only (historically) of another. . ."[75] No such severe judgment can rightly be passed on one who thus "expresses his own story modestly." Perhaps reminiscence borders on the sentimental, but this does not imply vanity. Lamb's own justification in "New Year's Eve" is good:

> In a degree beneath manhood, it is my infirmity to look back upon those early days. Do I advance a paradox when I say, that, skipping over the intervention of forty years, a man may have leave to love himself, without the imputation of self-love?"[76]

And, further, if the story told is one of serene and happy childhood, it will find a welcome among most readers. For, as Lamb asks--

> Why must everything smack of man, and mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and the best some of the child's heart left, to respond to its earliest enchantments?[77]

In the same essay we can perhaps get a few other glimpses into the reason why Lamb so cherished his childhood. He admits that

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[75] Ibid., "Preface, by a Friend of the Late Elia," IV, 4.

[76] Ibid., "New Year's Eve," III, 55.

[77] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 173.

the man Elia is apt to be harshly criticized for the humorous front and mocking ways he assumes.

> . . . but for the child Elia--that "other me," there, in the background--I must take leave to cherish the remembrance of that young master--with as little reference, I protest, to this stupid changeling of five-and-forty, as if it had been a child of some other house, and not of my parents. I can cry over its patient small-pox at five, and rougher medicaments. I can lay its poor fevered head upon the sick pillow at Christ's, and wake with it in surprise at the gentle posture of maternal tenderness hanging over it, that unknown had watched its sleep. I know how it shrank from any the least colour of falsehood.--God help thee, Elia, how art thou changed!--Thou art sophisticated.--I know how honest, how courageous (for a weakling) it was--how religious, how imaginative, how hopeful! From what have I not fallen, if the child I remember was indeed myself,--and not some dissembling guardian, presenting a false identity, to give the rule to my unpractised steps, and regulate the tone of my moral being![78]

And we give him leave to "cherish the remembrance" of himself and of all his friends when we see the relief and comfort he received from not only cherishing these memories, but writing them for the public as well.

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[78] Ibid., "New Year's Eve," III, 55-56.

Memories of Places

If Lamb's first love was men, his second was probably places. He was always fond of classic scenes and time-honored buildings, old towers and ivy-covered walls. But he was equally fond of those places that, though not necessarily antique, were associated with his past life. He somehow felt the genius of places and could enjoy scenes for their own sake. We have referred in the preceding chapters to the places that were familiar to Lamb: the Temple, Mackery End, Blakesware, Christ's Hospital, the South-Sea House, the East India House, and others. Our consideration here is Lamb's own delineation of these scenes and places as we have it in his writings.

The most natural starting point would be the scene of Lamb's birth and infancy--the Temple. This was an historic place in old London. It had been originally the headquarters of the Knights Templar, and from them it passed into the hands of two legal societies, the Inner and Middle Temple. It became the stronghold of law in the city. Charles and Mary played about its gardens and fountains and halls, were awed by the stately old church with its dome and pillars and by the many halls with windows looking down upon the garden. In 1821 Lamb looked back with the memory of this early scene still fresh in his mind and wrote:

> Indeed, it is the most elegant spot in the metropolis. What a transition for a countryman visiting London for the first time--the passing from the crowded Strand or Fleet Street, by unexpected avenues, into its magnificent ample squares, its classic green recesses![79]

Lamb describes the Temple with so much zest that he seems almost to have been a student there himself. He has caught the glamour of the place so completely that he resents any changes made in the buildings or gardens:

> They have lately gothicised the entrance to the Inner Temple-hall, and the library front; to assimilate them, I suppose, to the body of the hall, which they do not at all resemble. What is become of the winged horse that stood over the former? a stately arms! and who has removed those frescoes of the Virtues, which Italianised the end of the Paper-buildings?--my first hint of allegory! They must account to me for these things, which I miss so greatly.[80]

Of all things Lamb hated, change was the foremost. And we regret with him that any disturbing renovations should be made on this shrine of antiquity.

At an early age (about six) Lamb attended Bird's academy. The only mention of this school is in the essay on Captain Starkey. Along with a description of Bird and his assistant, Starkey, Lamb writes thus of the place itself:

> . . . The schoolroom stands where it did, looking into a discoloured, dingy garden in the passage leading from Fetter Lane into Bartlett's Buildings. It is still a school, though the main prop, alas! has fallen so inglo-

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[79] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 169.

[80] Ibid., "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," III, 173.

> riously; and bears a Latin inscription over the entrance in the lane, which was unknown in our humbler times. Heaven knows what "languages" were taught in it then! I am sure that neither my sister nor myself brought any out of it, but a little of our native English. By "mathematics," reader, must be understood "ciphering." It was, in fact, a humble day-school, at which reading and writing were taught to us boys in the morning; and the same slender erudition was communicated to the girls, our sisters, etc., in the evening.[81]

We have noted Mackery End as the spot of many carefree holidays for Mary and Charles Lamb. When Mary was "fifty odd" (and Lamb forty), the brother and sister revisited this place. Lamb writes of his sister's reactions:

> Bridget's was more a waking bliss than mine, for she easily remembered her old acquaintance again--some altered features, of course, a little grudged at. At first, indeed, she was ready to disbelieve for joy; but the scene soon reconfirmed itself in her affections--and she traversed every outpost of the old mansion, to the wood-house, the orchard, the place where the pigeon-house had stood (house and birds were alike flown)--with a breathless impatience of recognition, which was more pardonable perhaps than decorous at the age of fifty odd. But Bridget in some things is behind her years.[82]

His own recollections were more hazy:

> The oldest thing I remember is Mackery End, or Mackarel End, as it is spelt, perhaps more properly, in some old maps of Hertfordshire; a farm-house,--delightfully situated within a gentle walk from Wheathampstead. I can just remember having been there, on a visit to a great-aunt when I was a child, under the care of Bridget. . .[83]

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[81] Ibid., "Captain Starkey," VII, 113.

[82] Ibid., "Mackery End in Hertfordshire," III, 151-52.

[83] Ibid., "Mackery End in Hertfordshire," III, 150.

His reactions to the place on this later visit were not what he expected:

> . . . The sight of the old farm-house, though every trace of it was effaced from my recollections, affected me with a pleasure which I had not experienced for many a year. For though I had forgotten it, we had never forgotten being there together, and we had been talking about Mackery End all our lives, till memory on my part became mocked with a phantom of itself, and I thought I knew the aspect of a place, which, when present, O how unlike it was to that which I had conjured up so many times instead of it![84]

The details of Mackery End given in this essay coincide somewhat with the farmhouse experience of Louisa Manners in Mrs. Leicester's School. In this story, the girl, whom we could think of as Charles Lamb, exclaims over the sweet orchard, the baskets of flowers, the beautiful garden, the good-natured cow, the clean dairy, the wood-house and many other objects that were undoubtedly a part of Mackery End. Lamb probably had this place in mind when he wrote the story of Louisa.

Some of Lamb's tenderest memories are of Blakesware, or Blakesmoor, as he chooses to disguise it. He wandered over its grounds and through its halls with awe and wonder when his grandmother was in sole charge of it. "I do not know," he said, "a pleasure more affecting than to range at will over the deserted apartments of some fine old family mansion."[85]

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[84] Ibid., "Mackery End in Hertfordshire," III, 151.

[85] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 1.

Lamb indeed had his fill of this pleasure in his visits to Blakesware, which was even then deserted:

> It was an old deserted place, yet not so long deserted but that traces of the splendour of past inmates were everywhere apparent. Its furniture was still standing--even to the tarnished gilt leather battledores, and crumbling feathers of shuttlecocks in the nursery, which told that children had once played there.[86]

As Lamb goes on, in a passage quoted on page 11 in Chapter II, "Why, every plank and panel of that house for me had magic in it"---the haunted room in which old Mrs. Battle died, the gallery of good old family portraits. Lamb spent many hours dreaming that they were his:

> Mine too, Blakesmoor, was thy noble Marble Hall, with its mosaic pavements, and its Twelve Caesars--stately busts in marble--ranged round; of whose countenances, young reader of faces as I was, the frowning beauty of Nero, I remember, had most of my wonder; but the mild Galba had my love. There they stood in the coldness of death, yet freshness of immortality.
>
> Mine, too, thy lofty Justice Hall, with its one chair of authority, high-backed and wickered, ...
>
> Mine, too,--whose else?--thy costly fruit-garden, with its sun-baked southern wall; the ampler pleasure-garden, rising backwards from the house in triple terraces. . .[87]

Margaret Green's story in Mrs. Leicester's School contains a description of the house, the Twelve Caesars, Hogarth's prints, family portraits, etc., and we recognize here that the place must be Blakesware. The garden reference in "The Last Peach" is probably to this same place:

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[86] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 1.

[87] Ibid., "Blakesmoor in H---shire," IV, 7.

> When a child, I was once let loose, by favour of a nobleman's gardener, into his lordship's magnificent fruit-garden, with full leave to pull the currants and the gooseberries. . .[88]

It may be that the description of the old house in Chapter XI of Rosamund Gray bears some traces of Blakesware, also.

On re-visiting Blakesware, Lamb, in the essay on it, mourns over its ruins, "reduced to an antiquity," and in "Dream Children" he says--:

> . . . all its ornaments were stripped and carried away to the owner's other house, where they were set up, and looked as awkward as if some one were to carry away the old tombs they had seen lately at the Abbey, and stick them up in Lady C.'s tawdry gilt drawing-room.[89]

Lamb loved this place and glorified every object in it in his recollections. Writing to Southey on October 31, 1799, he tells of his return visit, "a few red-letter days" spent at Blakesware and its tapestried bedroom, marble hall, and its church. He could write of these, he says, but "there are feelings which refuse to be translated." As Lamb says, he could write of objects, but the many tender feelings linked with them were too fine, too tender to be put into ordinary correspondence.

Of the old and awful cloisters of Christ's Hospital, with its regality and antiquity, its magnificences, its com-

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[88] Ibid., "The Last Peach," VII, 85.

[89] Ibid., "Dream Children: A Reverie," III, 198.

forts and traditions, we have a splendid picture in "Recollections of Christ's Hospital." The Blue-coat boy feels the greatness of his school, Lamb says--

> . . . in his spacious schoolrooms, and in the well-ordered, airy, and lofty rooms where he sleeps; in his stately dining-hall, hung round with pictures, by Verrio, Lely, and others, one of them surpassing in size and grandeur almost any other in the kingdom.[90]

Other memories of Christmas festivities, holiday excursions, and punishments are recalled. Looking back at his Alma Mater from the stature of manhood, Lamb declares that it has kept and always will keep a significant place in his memory.

> In affectionate recollections of the place where he was bred up, in hearty recognitions of old schoolfellows met with again after the lapse of years, or in foreign countries, the Christ's Hospital boy yields to none; I might almost say he goes beyond most other boys. The very compass and magnitude of the school, its thousand bearings, the space it takes up in the imagination beyond the ordinary schools, impresses a remembrance, accompanied with an elevation of mind, that attends him through life. It is too big, too affecting an object, to pass away quickly from his mind.[91]

Lamb's first Elia essay in 1820, was on the South-Sea House, where he worked for about five months. As Lamb looks back on this place at the age of forty-five, the romantic glamor of antiquity hovers over this "melancholy-looking, handsome, brick and stone edifice, . . . its magnificent por-

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[90] Ibid., "Recollections of Christ's Hospital," VI, 281.

[91] Ibid., "Recollections of Christ's Hospital," VI, 291.

tals ever gaping wide, and disclosing to view a grave court, with cloisters and pillars, with few or no traces of goers-in or comers-out--a desolation something like Balclutha's."[92] The portrait of the old house is done in fine shades:

> This was once a house of trade--a centre of busy interests. The throng of merchants was here--the quick pulse of gain. . . stately porticos; imposing staircases; offices roomy as the state apartments in palaces . . . the still more sacred interiors of court and committee rooms, with venerable faces of beadles, door-keepers--directors seated in form on solemn days (to proclaim a dead dividend) at long worm-eaten tables, that have been mahogany, with tarnished gilt-leather coverings, supporting massy silver inkstands long since dry; . . . huge charts, which subsequent discoveries have antiquated;--dusty maps of Mexico, dim as dreams, and soundings of the Bay of Panama! . . .
>
> Such is the South-Sea House. At least, such it was forty years ago, when I knew it--a magnificent relic! What alterations may have been made in it since, I have had no opportunities of verifying. Time, I take for granted, has not freshened it. No wind has resuscitated the face of the sleeping waters. A thicker crust by this time stagnates upon it.[93]

Here is truly fine sentiment tinted with quaint humor and whimsicality. It is remarkable that Lamb could remember in such detail a place he had left and clerks he had known at the age of seventeen. It is one of the finest descriptive passages in all of Lamb's works.

Of the East India House, we have only a few words of memory in "The Superannuated Man." After his pension Lamb looks back and addresses the house:

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[92] Ibid., "The South-Sea House," III, 1.

[93] Ibid., "The South-Sea House," III, 1-2.

> . . . and thou, thou dreary pile, fit mansion for a Gresham or a Whittington of old, stately house of Merchants; with thy labyrinthine passages, and light-excluding, pent-up offices, where candles for one-half the year supplied the place of the sun's light; unhealthy contributor to my weal, stern fosterer of my living, farewell![94]

Because of family circumstances, Lamb never could attend a university. But we saw in Chapter II that he visited Oxford and pretended to be a student. Through his pretense he shows his respect for the antiquity of the place:

> The walks at these times are so much one's own,--the tall trees of Christ's, the groves of Magdalen! The halls deserted, and with open doors inviting one to slip in unperceived . . . Then, to take a peep in by the way at the butteries, and sculleries, redolent of antique hospitality: the immense caves of kitchens, kitchen fire-places, cordial recesses; ovens whose first pies were baked four centuries ago; and spits which have cooked for Chaucer! . . . Above all thy rarities, old Oxenford, what do most arride and solace me, are thy repositories of mouldering learning, thy shelves--
>
> What a place to be in is an old library! It seems as though all the souls of all the writers, that have bequeathed their labors to these Bodleians, were reposing here, as in some dormitory, or middle state. I do not want to handle, to profane the leaves, their winding-sheets. I could as soon dislodge a shade. I seem to inhale learning, walking amid their foliage; and the odour of their old moth-scented coverings is fragrant as the first bloom of those sciential apples which grew amid the happy orchard.[95]

The Lambs visited Paris in 1822, and enjoyed the charm and novelty of the old French towns, quaint streets, and old palaces. He writes of Paris to Barron Field:

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[94] *Ibid.*, "The Superannuated Man," IV, 85-86.

[95] *Ibid.*, "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 16-18.

> . . . Paris is a glorious picturesque old city. London looks mean and new to it, as the town of Washington would, seem after it. But they have no St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey. The Seine, so much despised by Cockneys, is exactly the size to run through a magnificent street; palaces a mile long on one side, lofty Edinbro' stone (O the glorious antiques!) houses on the other.[96]

In "The Tombs in the Abbey," Lamb again shows his appreciation of the genius of place and his love of the past in protesting against the practice of charging admittance to all who want to gaze at the tombs and antiquities there.

Associated with the memory of his first play was the entrance to the theatre, which Lamb describes in "My First Play:"

> At the north end of Cross-court there yet stands a portal, of some architectural pretensions, though reduced to humble use, serving at present for an entrance to a printing-office. This old door-way, if you are young, Reader, you may not know was the identical pit entrance to old Drury--Garrick's Drury--all of it that is left. I never pass it without shaking some forty years from off my shoulders, recurring to the evening when I passed through it to see my first play.[97]

This reminds us of Lamb's affection for the theatres and the crowds of London. "The Londoner" tells why Lamb liked the city:

> Mr. Reflector,--I was born under the shadow of St. Dunstan's steeple, just where the conflux of the eastern and western inhabitants of this twofold city meet and jostle in friendly opposition at Temple Bar. . . . The

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[96] Ibid., "Letter to Barron Field, September 22, 1822, II, Chap. I, 65-66.

[97] Ibid., "The Londoner," VII, 248-49.

> man must have a rare recipe for melancholy, who can be dull in Fleet Street. I am naturally inclined to hypochondria, but in London it vanishes, like all other ills. Often, when I have felt a weariness or distaste at home, have I rushed out into her crowded Strand, and fed my humour, till tears have wetted my cheek for unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture, which she never fails to present at all hours, like the scenes of a shifting pantomime.[98]

Thus it is that Lamb dwells in the past, and gives to scenes and places that were dear to him, a romantic atmosphere. Whether it be an old building, a college, a solemn churchyard, an old theatre, a secluded garden, an old library--all are suffused with the fond sentiment of impassioned recollection.

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[98] *Ibid.*, "The Londoner," VII, 248-49.

Love of Old Books and Authors

> . . . He never could pass the fascinating old bookstalls and junk-shops, where musty treasures, as mellow and odorous as old cheese, could be picked up for a few pence, without stopping to buy. It was his hobby; he knew all these disreputable old corners in London, and indulgence in this very inexpensive taste was his one extravagance.[99]

Lamb was an ardent collector of old books. The more worn and decrepit the books were, the more he cherished them. He writes to Coleridge:

> . . . a book reads the better, which is our own, and has been so long known to us, that we know the topography of its blots and dog's-ears, and can trace the dirt in it to having read it at tea with buttered muffins, or over a pipe, which I think is the maximum.[100]

He was always proud of his shelf full of old books. Few modern ones were allowed to stay there. When he moved into the cottage at Islington, he wrote to Bernard Barton of the "cheerful dining-room, all studded over and rough with old books."[101] Crabb Robinson described Lamb's library of books as the "finest collection of shabby books I ever saw."[102] Lamb did not collect old books just for the sake of having many

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[99] Alice E. Lord, The Days of Lamb and Coleridge (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1893), p. 351.

[100] Lamb, op. cit., Letter, October 11, 1802, I, Chap. II, 72-73.

[101] Ibid., Letter to Bernard Barton, September 2, 1823, II, Chap. I, 114.

[102] Henry Crabb Robinson, Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1871),II,1.

old relics. He loved old books and authors, and when he found a choice copy, it was a treasure to him. His library was his dearest possession. Musing over death and life thereafter, Lamb queries:

> And you, my midnight darlings, my Folios; must I part with the intense delight of having you (huge armfuls) in my embraces? Must knowledge come to me, if it come at all, by some awkward experiment of intuition, and no longer by this familiar process of reading?[103]

It was like Lamb to appreciate the library above everything else at Oxford. His exclamation over it, quoted on page 89 of this chapter, is in true Elian fashion.

No one was happier than Lamb when he found an old longed-for volume in some dark corner of a book-stall. Bridget recalls the time in "Old China" when he dragged home an old rare folio Beaumont and Fletcher. She says:

> . . . Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o'clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you should be too late--and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures--and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome. . .[104]

But Lamb cherished it in spite of the accidents that had befallen it. He protested to Bernard Barton against a modern edition of Pilgrim's Progress, and cherished his own copy of

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[103] Lamb, op. cit., "New Year's Eve," III, 58.

[104] Ibid., "Old China," IV, 176.

Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy in its ancient and quaint binding.

Lamb, as a collector of old books, did not buy to sell them, or just because they were rare curios. He loved to read all of his old "ragged veterans," as is attested by the frequent references to them in his letters and essays. Lamb's wide reading in the old books aided his writing as Elia. The unfamiliar and the quaint books and authors were his favorites, especially those that had been unjustly forgotten. He naturalized those authors who were foreign to his age. As Procter says, "He brought the wisdom of old times and old writers to bear upon the taste and intellect of his day."[106] He preferred not to discuss contemporary literature at the Wednesday evening gatherings in his home. He liked the Elizabethan Age and the Seventeenth century. Discussions of Bunyan, Milton, Spenser, and Pope were frequent.

It was not that Lamb hated all modern writing. He respected contemporary writers, especially those who were his friends. He interpreted Coleridge and Wordsworth to the public and advised them personally on their work. Wordsworth wanted him to write a review of the Excursion, and the resulting essay shows Lamb's sane criticism. To Coleridge he wrote in 1796, "I have read all your Religious Musings with uninterrupted

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[106] Lamb, op. cit., Letter, June (May 31), 1796, I, Chap. I, 13.

feelings of profound admiration. You may safely rest your fame on it."[107] Lamb, we can see, sometimes allowed personal prejudice to affect his judgment, as this praise is more than the work deserved. Lamb probably appreciated Coleridge's works as much because the two men were friends as that the works themselves were great. The letter to Southey of November 8, 1798, shows Lamb's esteem of the "Ancient Mariner:"

> . . . If you wrote that review in the *Critical Review*, I am sorry you are so sparing of praise to the *Ancient Mariner*. So far from calling it as you do, with some wit, but more severity, a "Dutch Attempt," etc., I call it a right English attempt, and a successful one, to dethrone German sublimity.[108]

Byron was thoroughly hated by Lamb. The comment made on Byron's death in a letter to Barton in 1824 will suffice to show his opinion of the stormy poet:

> So we have lost another Poet. I never much relished his Lordship's mind, and shall be sorry if the Greeks have cause to miss him. He was to me offensive, and I never can make out his great *power*, which his admirers talk of. Why, a line of Wordsworth's is a lever to lift the immortal spirit! Byron can only move the Spleen. He was at best a Satyrist,--in any other way, he was mean enough. I daresay I do him injustice; but I cannot love him, nor squeeze a tear to his memory.[109]

Lamb admired the poetry of Keats. He thought "St. Agnes' Eve"

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[107] Lamb, *op. cit.*, Letter, June (May 31), 1796, I, Chap. I, 13.

[108] *Ibid.*, Letter, November 8, 1798, I, Chap. I, 138.

[109] *Ibid.*, Letter, May 15, 1824, II, Chap. I, 148.

and "Lamia" contained the "gorgeous stuff of romance." Shelley he disliked probably because that poet was too ethereal and revolutionary. Lamb was quieter, opposing the noise and clamor of revolutions. He also discovered William Blake as a poet, and expressed his opinion of him (whom he called "Robert") in the letter quoted above. We know that Lamb admired Southey. Writing to Coleridge in 1796, he says that he was delighted and amazed with Southey's Joan of Arc, and that this one poem would save the whole age from the accusation of degenerating in poetry. "On the whole I expect Southey one day to rival Milton."[110] This, we can see now, is an over-enthusiastic commendation of his friend. Mrs. Barbauld was a writer of children's stories of which Lamb frankly gives his opinion to Coleridge:

> . . . Knowledge insignificant and vapid as Mrs. Barbauld's books convey, it seems, must come to a child in the shape of knowledge; and his empty noddle must be turned with conceit of his own powers when he has learnt that a horse is an animal, and Billy is better than a horse and such like . . .
>
> Hang them!--I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those blights and blasts of all that is human in man and child.[111]

One further reference to Lamb's relations with his contemporary world of letters has to do with the Quarterly Review. Lamb was thoroughly antagonistic to the Review that reflected on Lamb as

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[110] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, June 10, 1796, I, Chap. I, 18.

[111] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, October 23, 1802, I Chap. II, 75.

a maniac because of his six-weeks' period of insanity. Then the editor revised Lamb's review of Wordsworth's _Excursion_ so much that Lamb complained to Wordsworth that its charm was all gone, a third of the copy cut out, and the result utter nonsense. Another reason for his dislike of the _Review_, as he told Southey, was that it insinuated that his "Confessions of a Drunkard" was pure autobiography.

If Lamb cared little for modern authors except as they were his friends, he had a deep regard for all old English writers. Lamb belonged less to his own time than to the age of Shakespeare, Ford, Browne, and Fuller. He had a genius for tasting the flavor of the old writers, particularly those who had been forgotten. He brought to light and showed beauties in many old dramatists and prose writers that his contemporaries had overlooked. He half apologizes for this taste of his in "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading:"

> Shall I be thought fantastical if I confess that the names of some of our poets sound sweeter, and have a finer relish to the ear--to mine, at least--than that of Milton or of Shakespeare? It may be that the latter are more staled and rung upon in common discourse. The sweetest names, and which carry a perfume in the mention, are, Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Cowley.[112]

This was not contrariness in Lamb; he didn't find his way back to the old writers to spite authors of his own day. He felt

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[112] _Ibid._, "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," IV, 23-24.

them worthy of reading and study, and was indignant when books of criticism contained no mention of Beaumont and Fletcher and Massinger. "I wish you would try and do something to bring our elder bards into more general fame," he wrote to Coleridge.[113] He genuinely appreciated the old Elizabethan writers and others, most of whom he had first discovered as a child browsing in Samuel Salt's library or among the books at Blakesware. "Books think for me," he said. "I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds."[114] Day after day he lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with old dramatists, poets, and prose writers as his intimate companions. Of the sixteenth century writers, Lamb liked the "soothing phantasies of honey-tongued Spenser,"[115] and the "amorous fancies--far-fetched conceits" of Sidney.[116] He particularly likes the fact that the sonnets are not only rich in words but have time and place and a certain circumstantiality. The reason for the Elia essay on Sidney's sonnets, Lamb says, is that "W. H. [Hazlitt] takes every occasion of insulting the memory of Sir

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[113] Ibid., Letter, July 1, 1796, I, Chap. I, 38.

[114] Ibid., "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," IV, 19.

[115] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, January 10, 1797, I, Chap. I, 91.

[116] Ibid., "Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sydney," IV, 117.

Philip Sydney."[117] Lamb constantly felt it his duty to defend his favorite old authors. His generation, he thought, was missing much in literature that was worthwhile and beautiful by neglecting the older English writers.

It is easy to understand that Lamb would love Shakespeare. Of all the old authors whom he read, he knew Shakespeare the best. In Hazlitt's famous recollection of the conversation about persons one might wish to have seen, we find Lamb saying that if Shakespeare were to come into the room, everyone would rise to meet him. It was Lamb's way always to exalt Shakespeare and to treat him as a sort of magician and alchemist in the dramatic art. In a fragment of criticism, Lamb has a paragraph on Shakespeare's characters:

> It is the praise of Shakespeare, with reference to the playwriters his contemporaries, that he has so few revolting characters. Yet he has one that is singularly mean and disagreeable,--the King in "Hamlet." Neither has he characters of insignificance, unless the phantom that stalks over the stage as Julius Caesar, in the play of that name, may be accounted one. Neither has he envious characters, excepting the short part of Don John in "Much Ado about Nothing." Neither has he unentertaining characters, if we except Parolles, and the little that there is of the clown in "All's Well that Ends Well."[118]

How characteristic of Lamb as a critic that he should advance the argument that Shakespeare's plays are better as closet

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[117] *Ibid.*, "Some Sonnets of Sir Philip Sydney, IV, 125.

[118] *Ibid.*, "Fragments of Criticism," VII, 187.

dramas than as stage performances! He would prefer to read a play and let his own imagination fill in the scenery and facial expressions of the characters, than to have all of these things portrayed before his eyes. It is by such statements of keen insight that Lamb proved himself a worthy Shakespearean critic in his time. It is fortunate that such a critic should be the one to write a version of Shakespeare for children. The Tales from Shakespeare, by Charles and Mary Lamb is still a children's classic by reason of its charming spirit, so like that of the original text.

Lamb especially liked the Elizabethan dramatists and playwrights and revived the reading of them in his age. Present-day plays had insipid morality compared to them, he thought. He felt the strong moral implication, the deep passions, the power and imagination, and the conflicts of duty and desire in these plays and wanted others to appreciate them also. His Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived about the Time of Shakespeare is full of keen imaginative criticism. Lamb tells Coleridge that in Beaumont and Fletcher "there is a greater richness of poetical fancy than in any one, Shakespeare excepted." He continues:

> . . . I mean not to lay myself open by saying they exceed Milton, and perhaps Collins, in sublimity. But don't you conceive all poets, after Shakespeare, yield to 'em in variety of genius? Massinger treads close on their heels; but you are most probably as well acquainted with his writings as your humble servant. My quotations, in that case, will only serve to show my barrenness of matter.

> Southey, in simplicity and tenderness, is excelled decidedly only, I think, by Beaumont and Fletcher--in his "Maid's Tragedy" and some parts of "Philaster" in particular, and elsewhere occasionally; and perhaps by Cowper in his "Crazy Kate," and in parts of his translation; such as the speeches of Hecuba and Andromache.[119]

We are tempted to feel that perhaps Lamb's enthusiasm mounts too high, but when we study the quotations he makes from these favorite authors of his, we are inclined to agree with his opinions.

Lamb chose to write an essay on the rather insignificant poet and satirist of the seventeenth century, George Wither. Few critics, indeed, would go back and see so much worth in an obscure writer. Lamb's praise of him is sincere and intelligent:

> The poems of G. Wither are distinguished by a hearty homeliness of manner, and a plain moral speaking. . . . That which he calls his Motto is a continued self-eulogy of two thousand lines, yet we read it to the end without any feeling of distaste, almost without a consciousness that we have been listening all the while to a man praising himself. There are none of the cold particles in it, the hardness and self-ends which render vanity and egotism hateful. He seems to be praising another person, under the mask of self; or rather we feel that it was indifferent to him where he found the virtue which he celebrates; whether another's bosom or his own, were its chosen receptacle.[120]

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[119] Ibid., Letter, June 14, 1796, I, Chap. I, 34.

[120] Ibid., "On the Poetical Works of George Wither," VII, 240.

For the prose writers in the age of Milton, those he liked included Bacon, Burton, Browne, Taylor, Fuller, Walton, Feltham, and Milton himself. A typical passage of criticism is that on Fuller, the religious historian:

> The writings of Fuller are usually designated by the title of quaint, and with sufficient reason; for such was his natural bias to conceits, that I doubt not upon most occasions it would have been going out of his way to have expressed himself out of them. . . Above all, his way of telling a story, for its eager liveliness, and the perpetual running commentary of the narrator happily blended with the narration, is perhaps unequalled.[121]

Lamb tells Coleridge in 1796, that Walton's Compleat Angler was the delight of his childhood and that he is still partial to its simple dialogue and pastoral beauties.[122] Milton's works he refers to as "sacred energies,"[123] and pleads for a wider reading of all of Milton's works. Speaking of Cowley, Lamb tells Coleridge that he prefers the graceful rambling of that author's essays to the courtly elegance and ease of Addison.[124]

Restoration comedy was to him as escape from the reali-

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[121] Ibid., "Specimens from the Writings of Fuller," IV, 355.

[122] Ibid., Letter, June 10, 1796, I, Chap. I, 29.

[123] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, January 10, 1797, I, Chap. I, 91.

[124] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, January 10, 1797, I, Chap. I, 92.

ties of life. He believed in going to the theatre and leaving his everyday cares and problems behind. We have been spoiled, he says, in the essay "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" by the "all-devouring drama of common life."[125] We cannot get away from the business of life long enough to go to the theatre and escape the pressure of reality:

> We carry our fire-side concerns to the theatre with us . . . I confess for myself that . . . I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience. . . I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it. I wear my shackles more contentedly for having respired the breath of an imaginary freedom.[126]

The plays of Wycherly and Congreve were graceful and light to Lamb and he could forget his troubles while seeing them.

De Foe, Pope, Smollett, Goldsmith, and Cowper were his eighteenth century friends. Writing to Walter Wilson of De Foe:

> His style is everywhere beautiful, but plain and homely . . . His novels are capital kitchen-reading, while they are worthy, from their deep interest, to find a shelf in the libraries of the wealthiest and the most learned.[127]

He declares that he could forgive a man for not enjoying Milton, but no man would be his friend who disliked the "'divine chit-chat of Cowper.'"[128]

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[125] Ibid., "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," III, 275-76.

[126] Ibid., "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," III, 276-77.

[127] Ibid., Letter to Walter Wilson, December 16, 1822, II, Chap. I, 77.

[128] Ibid., Letter to Coleridge, December 5, 1796, I, Chap. I, 73.

Both as a reader and a critic of old authors and books, Lamb's forte was in discerning new and unusual beauties. He never judged in an orderly manner as he tells Godwin:

> As to reviewing, in particular, my head is so whimsical a head, that I cannot, after reading another man's book, let it have been never so pleasing, give any account of it in any methodical way. I cannot follow his train.[128]

He rather seems to pick out details and particulars that struck him as he read. Hence, there is a sort of incompleteness in all of his criticism. We cannot class him in any one school of criticism, but he leans toward the Romantics, as did his friends Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Hazlitt, and Hunt. Personal prejudice affected his judgment, especially criticism of his contemporaries; however, as a judge of the Elizabethans and the seventeenth century prose writers, his discrimination was remarkably right. An old book or writer with no real worth seldom received Lamb's praise. The antiquity and age of a book did not necessarily bespeak its excellence. That was good art which had proved itself good and which would stand the test of analysis. Lamb had first learned to read from a critical point of view in the libraries he knew as a child. His taste and judgment for the fine in literature developed there, and this personal intuition rarely failed him as a critic.

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[128] Ibid., Letter to William Godwin, November 10, 1803, I, Chap. II, 99.

CHAPTER V

THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE PAST

Archaic Style

To such a one as Charles Lamb, so steeped in the literature of a past age, it becomes very natural to write in the style of authors read and loved. His style surely is not modern but based on the prose masters and poets of the seventeenth century and the dramatists of the sixteenth. He felt a natural kinship with these writers; he thought as they did, enjoyed their antique flavor, and relished their quaintness and conceits. A particular theme might send him back to a half-conscious imitation of an old author. For example, "A Character of the Late Elia" carries much of the flavor and appeal of Addison's essay in "The Spectator" for March 1, 1711. Here Addison is introducing himself to the reader, telling of his infancy and of his work as a writer. He will keep to himself, he says, his name, his age, and his lodgings. How very like the mystification of Elia! Both essayists take refuge behind a pseudonym. Again, Lamb's sketch of "The Wedding" is quite imitative of the style of the Spectator.

Sir Thomas Browne's influence is felt in Lamb's writing in this passage in "A Quaker's Meeting:"

> The Abbey Church of Westminster hath nothing so solemn, so spirit soothing, as the naked walls and benches of a Quakers' Meeting. Here are no tombs, no inscriptions. . .

> but here is something which throws Antiquity herself into the fore-ground--Silence--eldest of things--language of old Night--primitive Discourser--to which the insolent decays of mouldering grandeur have but arrived by a violent, and, as we may say, unnatural progression.[1]

Such a passage of soaring imagination and mystery, of rhythm and sonority is very like Browne's prose. The melancholic tone in Lamb's poem "To a River in Which a Child Was Drowned" brings to mind the mournful, solemn feeling in Browne's _Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burial_. It is in such instances as these that the reader feels Lamb's imitation of old writers. His style becomes aromatic. The effect is not due merely to the use of old phrases and conceits but to the balanced sentences and the climaxes of thought as well. He has studied the varied styles of old authors and from them formed an individual style of his own.

Lamb especially liked to read and imitate a style rich in fancy and odd turns of thought. This was to him the purer English. The rich, full imagery of Taylor, Browne, and Fuller would seem uninteresting to many, but to Lamb it was perfection of style. The conceits and quaintness of the seventeenth century writers were cleverly used by Lamb in his humor. The opening words of "Poor Relations" are a good illustration:

> A Poor Relation--is the most irrelevant thing in nature,--a piece of impertinent correspondency,--an

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[1] Lamb, _op_. _cit_., "A Quaker's Meeting," III, 90.

> odious approximation,--a haunting conscience,--a preposterous shadow, lengthening in the noon-tide of our prosperity,--an unwelcome remembrancer,--a perpetually recurring mortification,--a drain on your purse,--a more intolerable dun upon your pride, --a drawback upon success,--a rebuke to your rising, --a stain in your blood,--a blot on your 'scutcheon, --a rent in your garment,--a death's head at your banquet,--Agathocles' pot,--a Mordecai in your gate, --a Lazarus at your door,--a lion in your path,--a frog in your chamber,--a fly in your ointment,--a mote in your eye,--a triumph to your enemy,--an apology to your friends,--the one thing not needful,--the hail in harvest,--the ounce of sour in a pound of sweet.[2]

What fanciful metaphors Lamb has contrived to use in describing a poor relation! He has run away and collected them from many sources--to the Bible for Lazarus and Mordicai and the mote in the eye; to nature for the frog, the fly, and the lion; to a proverb for the "ounce of sour in a pound of sweet." Lamb tells us that he established his reputation as a writer of conceits as chief jester for a paper. The topic of women's ankles was a popular subject, and he gives us the conceit that he considered his best one: "Modesty, taking her final leave of mortals, her last Blush was visible in her ascent to the Heavens by the tract of the glowing instep."[3] This, he declares, was the "crowning conceit," and he was henceforth pronounced a "capital hand."

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[2] Ibid., "Poor Relations," IV, 9.

[3] Ibid., "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago," IV, 131.

Lamb also liked and used old verb-endings, such as "-eth." We find these in "Two Races of Men," in "Amicus Redivivus" in the description of the doctor and in the description of the roast pig in the essay of that name. To quote from this last:

> Behold him while he is doing--it seemeth rather a refreshing warmth, than a scorching heat, that he is so passive to. How equably he twirleth round the string! Now he is just done. To see the extreme sensibility of that tender age! he hath wept out his pretty eyes. . .[4]

Quoting again from "Poor Relations" we see this verb-ending:

> He entereth smiling and--embarrassed. He holdeth out his hand to you to shake, and--draweth it back again. He casually looketh in about dinner-time--when the table is full. He offereth to go away, seeing you have company --but is induced to stay.[5]

Lamb used such antique forms to give the flavor of the archaic to his style. The effect is a happy one. It is interesting to notice in the passages just quoted his use of dashes and commas, sometimes one or the other, sometimes both used in the same place. He had a sense of just what punctuation to use and where to use it.

One cannot read far in Lamb before noticing his unique vocabulary. It came to him as a result of his varied reading in the old writers. When he found that modern language and thought failed to express what he desired, he introduced an-

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[4] Ibid., "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig," III, 241.

[5] Ibid., "Poor Relations," IV, 9.

tique words and phrases to enrich the plainer prose of his day. For instance, in "Oxford in the Vacation," he says that his readers may have begun to think he is a "notched and cropt scrivener" himself, after reading his descriptions of the South-Sea House clerks. "Well, I do agnise [confess] something of the sort," he says.[6] The word "agnize" is used very nonchalantly by Lamb, but we are apt to stop and attempt to fathom its meaning. Perhaps more effective still is his use of the word "arride," meaning amuse or please. For examples, we have one in "Oxford in the Vacation:"

> Above all thy rarities, old Oxenford, what do most arride and solace me, are thy repositories of mouldering learning, thy shelves--.[7]

Another is in "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago," where he declares that the conceit quoted on page 107 was the one that most "arrided" him. Here is a list of other antique words used by Lamb. It is interesting to ponder over their possible meanings: anti-queer-Diluvians, mumping, bohea, younkers, sapors, swinehood, intertwisted, extra-domiciliate, spinous, dulcifying, intenerating, coronative, endenzined, sciental, underish, enthronization, and many other such words that linger in the reader's memory. He seldom changed the spelling

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[6] Ibid., "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 13.

[7] Ibid., "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 17.

or meaning of these obsolete words but used them just as he had found them in his reading.

Another turn of Lamb's style is the use of "thou" and "your." He often uses forms of "thee" in addressing his readers as in "Oxford in Vacation" and "Two Races of Men," or in addressing something such as Oxford or antiquity. The old-fashioned "your" appears in "A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars:" "In tale or history your Beggar is ever the just antipode to your King."[8] Lamb frequently inserts Latin words and phrases such as "bellum ad exterminationem" in the essay just noted, and has written whole letters in Latin to his friends. One of these was to Coleridge on October 9, 1802. Without a knowledge of Latin and of the meanings of the antique words which he chose to rescue from oblivion, we cannot savor Lamb to the full. His humor is inseparable from his style. His jests were best expressed in antique words and quaint phrases.

We wonder at times if he has not insisted too often on using archaic language. His "peradventures" and "seemeths" may clog his style somewhat and make us wish that he would forget his mannerisms and speak more simply as he does in "Elia to Robert Southey." But we must recall that Lamb's purpose in using archaisms was to give a feeling of the past

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[8] Ibid., "A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars," III,224.

and to revive rich old words that were full of suggestion and imagery. For these purposes his style was most effective. Then, too, we must remember that Lamb's archaic style came naturally to him as a result of his reading in old English. It smacks of the antique, of Beaumont and Fletcher, of Hall and Ford. Hazlitt says in *Table Talk*, "Mr. Lamb is the only imitator of old English style I can read with pleasure; and he is so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of his authors, that the idea of imitation is almost done away."[9] This is true. Lamb was so steeped in the literature of the past that his use of obsolescent words was probably often unconscious and quite natural for him to use. He says of his works:

> Crude they are, I grant you--a sort of unlicked, incondite things,--villainously pranked in an affected array of antique modes and phrases. They had not been *his*, if they had been other than such; and better it *is*, that a writer should be natural in a self-pleasing quaintness, than to affect a naturalness (so called) that should be strange to him.[10]

It is perhaps more true that Lamb's style has a touch of antiquity than that it is antiquated. "The temper and spirit and form of expression which developed through the three centuries, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth, found a

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[9] William Hazlitt, *Table Talk*: *Essays on Men and Manners*, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

[10] Lamb, *op. cit.*, "Preface, by a Friend of the Late Elia," IV, xi.

modern dwelling-place in the personality and artistry of Charles Lamb."[11] To those who complain that Lamb ought to write in a style more in keeping with the taste of the age, we say with him, "Hang the age! I'll write for antiquity!"

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[11] Will D. Howe, Charles Lamb and His Friends (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1944), p. 313.

Feeling of the Past Conveyed to the Reader

It is not alone the use of archaic language that gives so much enchantment to the past in Lamb's writing. There is an aroma of old associations that we feel when we look backward with the author and linger in his half-pathetic mood over the charm of bygone things. It is the association of thoughts and feelings in the have-been as well as the remembrance of places and people and buildings that gives to so much of his work the melancholy nostalgia of the past. Such a play of the imagination on the past is seen in "Old China." The liking for pieces of rare old china sets off a delightful reminiscence over old places, books, people and feelings. The buying of the old folio of Beaumont and Fletcher was more than a purchase. It meant to the Lambs a recapturing of the spirit and flavor of a whole age. As they recall the purchase it brings to them loving memories of the struggles of poorer days, which in turn brings to mind an old brown suit, the fun of holidays, the gallery theatre seats, the taste of strawberries and fresh peas. Lamb's mind wanders in a seemingly aimless way back over past days and over such trifles. But he so illuminates them in unexpected ways that the reader's sympathy is aroused to the enjoyment of these memories, too. We hardly are aware that the beautiful dreams are only of small, unimportant things. The magic of Lamb's power as a

writer is that his imagination conquers reality. The dullest subjects assume sparkling colors under the embroidery of Lamb's imagery. This is due partly, as we have said, to his use of old words and phrases, but the imaginative quality in Lamb's style heightens the effect still more. It invests the most ordinary things with beauty. Notice how he brings to life the old and probably gloomy dullness of the South-Sea House:

> . . . to such as me, old house! there is a charm in thy quiet:--a cessation--a coolness from business--an indolence almost cloistral--which is delightful! With what reverence have I paced thy great bare rooms and courts at eventide! They spoke of the past:--
> . . . The very clerks which I remember in the South-Sea House--I speak of forty years back--had an air very different from those in the public offices that I have had to do with since. They partook of the genius of the place!12

The fact that Lamb deals with objects so common and familiar does not indicate a lack of imagination. I think that the delightful way in which he brings to life such simple things reveals even a greater imaginative genius. He sought his materials in the common things, but gives to all of them a grace and veneration. How cleverly he treats the cards in "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist!" They are "courtly combatants" playing "their gallant jousts and turneys" on the "verdant carpet" [the board]. The colors are gorgeous:

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12 Charles Lamb, "The South-Sea House," III, 3-4.

> --the pretty antic habits, like heralds in a procession--the gay triumph--assuring scarlets--the contrasting deadly-killing sables--the 'hoary majesty of spades'--Pam in all his glory!--[13]

Again, it is Lamb's own quill that comes to life: "The enfranchised quill, that has plodded all the morning among the cart-rucks of figures and ciphers, frisks and curvets so at its ease over the flowery carpet--ground of a midnight dissertation.--It feels its promotion."[14]

What Lamb has said of his quill is literally true of his fancy. It frisked over familiar trifles and made them fresh and beautiful. He animates the bricks and stones and mortar, as we have seen him do in "The South-Sea House." He saw the glory of the Temple, too, as we saw in Chapter IV. To him this antique place was "the most elegant spot in the metropolis." Surely "a man would give something to have been born in such places."[15] The very atmosphere of antiquity is here.

Under his pen the ancient and the common came to life in an atmosphere and charm all their own. This was especially true of his beloved London. As Martin says, "He transmuted the mud of street and pavement into pure gold, and so found

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[13] Ibid., "Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist," III, 67-68.

[14] Ibid., "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 14.

[15] Ibid., "The South-Sea House," III, 169-70.

all that was always precious to him in their stones."[16] He declared that he would not exchange her "dirtiest drab-frequented alley" for the most lovely country spot. What a depth of feeling lies in this apostrophe to London:

> O her lamps of a night! her rich goldsmiths, print-ships, toy-shops, mercers, hardwaremen, pastry-cooks, St. Paul's Churchyard, the Strand, Exeter Change, Charing Cross, with the man upon a black horse! These are thy gods, O London! . . . All the streets and pavements are pure gold, I warrant you. At least, I know an alchemy that turns her mud into that metal,--a mind that loves to be at home in crowds."[17]

And Lamb had a mind like that. For him, London bore a thousand old associations and memories that became more precious to him year by year. No matter how dirty or noisy or crowded, he loved them as Wordsworth loved the green hills and calm blue lakes. Hazlitt has well understood Lamb's feeling about London:

> The streets of London are his fairy-land, teeming with wonder, with life and interest to his retrospective glance, as it did to the eager eye of childhood; he has contrived to weave its tritest traditions into a bright and endless romance![18]

Indeed, antiquity could not be dry and lifeless when under the grip of the imagination of Elia. The old Hogarth prints in the mansion at Blakesware become fresh and alive as Lamb reads their grim histories and infuses something of

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[17] Lamb, op. cit., Letter to Thomas Manning, February or March, 1801, I, Chap. II, 34.

[18] William Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age, op. cit., p. 347.

himself into the pictures. He adds more to these vestiges of antiquity than most people would find there. They take on a charm probably never seen before. At another time, in "Rejoicings Upon the New Year's Coming of Age," he adds bits of old and curious folklore to the lively tale of the procession of the "Merry Days." Past associations always come crowding back upon him. When he and Mary visited the Tuileries and palaces in Paris, Lamb recalled the whole story of the revolutions and changes that took place there under Napoleon. Viewed in the light of retrospect and lingering memory, such events were not so much history as part of the venerable past of exciting memory. What a romantic spell is cast over Lamb's school-days when he calls to Coleridge to"come back into memory, like as thou wert in the day-spring of thy fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee." He opens to the reader's mind scenes and an acquaintance with people who are so real that we seem to have known them somewhere before. His whole world (and ours, as we read him) is refined by distance and infused with the pathos and nostalgia of cherished things gone by and yet remembered. "He has indeed extracted the beauty and innermost value of Antiquity whenever he has pressed it into service."[19]

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[19] Cornwall, op. cit., p. 18.

His writings contain all manner of relics of the past and the memories associated with them. They are "magic casements" wrought from his imagination, through which he could escape from the present. He could gather himself "up unto the old things," muse upon the days gone by, "act in thought past seasons o'er, and be a child again." We feel, indeed, a distinct atmosphere throughout Lamb's writing, because he found so much in the past to cherish and to love. It was to him gold, a charm, a tranquil rest and peace. When we have felt this love for the past in Lamb, we find ourselves wanting to exclaim with him:

> Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? that, being nothing, art everything! When thou _wert_ thou wert not antiquity--then thou wert nothing, but hadst a remoter _antiquity_, as thou calledst it to look back to with blind veneration; thou thyself being to thyself flat, jejune, _modern_! What mystery lurks in this retroversion? or what half Januses are we, that cannot look forward with the same idolatry with which we for ever revert! The mighty future is as nothing, being everything! the past is everything, being nothing![20]

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[20] _Ibid._, "Oxford in the Vacation," III, 17.

ABSTRACT

Charles Lamb's love of the past permeates all of his letters, essays, poems, plays and stories. Its importance as an influence on his writing and its value as a means to a thorough understanding of his personality will surely be seen by any reader of Lamb. He confines himself mainly to a personal past, a wistful backward glance to the vanished paradise of childhood and youth. Happy memories form the bulk of Lamb's treatment of the past. He also has a personal preference for writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and could perhaps be called a literary historian because of this preference. But Lamb was not a thorough historian of some ancient age or period. When he exclaims over antiquity, he is nearly always thinking of some place or event that is connected with happy recollections of his early life. He enjoyed reminiscing about his childhood and youth, but never propounded any theories of the past. He wrote of it from the beginning of his authorship, but, unlike Hazlitt, he ignored theories and doctrines. He was a lover rather than a student of the past.

As we look at the first twenty-five years of Lamb's life we see three main causes of his love of the past. The first lies in the fact that as a child he was constantly surrounded by an atmosphere of the past. He lived in old build-

ings, knew antiquarian and old-fashioned people. He was quite secluded from the modern things in London, and thus acquired early a romantic love of the past. Secondly, he found that work with cold figures in the India House ledgers was quite boring, and lifeless. Gradually his imagination began to play over events in his past. These gave life and sparkle to the otherwise dreary hours of work. Third, and most important, was the tragedy of Mary's insanity. Her killing of her mother and the repeated attacks of insanity throughout her life, was a dark cloud that saddened both Charles and Mary, but they found a silver lining in escaping present realities and looking past the tragedy to bright, happy memories of childhood.

It would have been difficult for Lamb to write so voluminously as he did of his past life without some device that would be a temporary escape from his grief. The pseudonym and personality of Elia solved his problem. While writing of his personal life for the public he could hide behind the pseudonym of Elia, thus concealing his identity and fictionalizing facts that he didn't want the public to know. His autobiography is often disguised by false names and places that appealed to his mischievous love of hoaxing. This pseudonym, however, was merely an outward expression of the second nature that Lamb had begun to form within himself after the tragedy of 1796. He turned first to religion for

comfort but didn't find satisfaction there. Then he began to assume a pose of humorous dallying. He tried to be gay and witty, to appear unconcerned about the serious questions of life. As Elia, he could mock and jest, and throw off sad reflection on his grief. He could dream of brighter days in his youth and pretend that his later life was ideally happy. Thus in his Essays of Elia, especially, his dreams and mockery and humor are phases of his Elia self. When he treats serious subjects non-seriously, we know he is expressing the Elia personality and offering himself relief from sorrow. Knowing this, we cannot misunderstand him or judge him harshly.

Lamb's writings are replete with memories of the past. He was quite detached from contemporary affairs. Political controversies, revolutions, even modern literature were of little concern to this man of antiquarian tastes. He was happiest in memories of old places and scenes that thrilled him as a child. The Inner Temple, which was his childhood home; Christ's Hospital, the school he loved so well; Blakesware and Mackery End, where he spent many vacations; Old Paris, Oxford, and other time-honored places were the idolized subjects of many memories. The friends and relatives he had known also figured in his recollections. His Grandmother, his mother, father, brother, and sister were the most impor-

tant to him. School friends at Christ's Hospital, the Old Benchers of the Inner Temple, the clerks at the South-Sea House, and a score of other characters were associated with Lamb's early life and found a place in his affectionate reminiscence. Memories of the tragedy--perhaps the most important single event in his whole life--are seldom mentioned by this courageous and kind author. Old books and authors, too, Lamb loved to read and know. He cherished his ragged-looking books and ungainly folios. They were his household treasures, particularly if they were the works of one of his favorite old authors. Many early writers he discovered in his childhood reading and he never lost his preference for old and often forgotten authors. He brought to life many that had been forgotten by his age.

Lamb became so thoroughly imbued with the spirit and style of his favorite old authors that we find him using their archaic style and obsolescent forms of expression. This was partly unconscious, I believe, but also done purposely at times to give the flavor and atmosphere of the past. Lamb has caught the charm of bygone days and past ages, and makes his readers feel the romance of antiquity. His writings are a kind of distillation of years of brooding and reverie. He gives us an impassioned recollections, a sentimental attachment to well-loved scenes and persons and books. He has

brought his power of enchantment to these things so forcefully that his world is still alive to us today, and he himself has been the companion of whole generations of friends who speak of him as the "most lovable figure in English literature."

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